"MARR'D IN MAKING"

BY

BARONESS VON HUTTEN

Olga A. Carr. Holm

"MARR'D IN MAKING"

By the Same Author

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A STUDY IN FLUCTUATIONS

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BETH

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BY

BARONESS VON HUTTEN

AUTHOR OF "MISS CARMICHAEL'S CONSCIENCE," ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY
E. PLAISTED ABBOTT

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TO

F K. H.

WITH
LOVE

2228977

—"*Some there are who tell*
Of one who threatens he will toss to Hell
The luckless pots he marr'd in making"

OMAR KHAYYAM

PART ONE

"MARR'D IN MAKING"

CHAPTER I

THE light, sifting in softly through closed shutters, filled the room with a delicate green gloom more akin to darkness than to light.

Falling across the bed, it drew a faint shimmer from the ring on the loose-lying hand of the sick woman, and showed, even against the whiteness of the counterpane, the strange pallor of the hand itself. Beyond the bed, on a small table covered with a linen cover edged with crochetted lace, stood a carafe, a tall, engraved glass, a medicine bottle, and a green-and-gold china atomizer.

From the pillow where the sick woman lay, the great old-fashioned black furni-

ture—too new to be picturesque, too old to be graceful—seemed to be absorbing slowly the little light there was into its own vague darkness, and of the old engravings symmetrically hung on the walls she could see only the faint gleam of the gold on the inner edge of the frames.

There was no sound; the house was filled with that stillness that accompanies the first hour after a birth or a death.

At length the sick woman spoke: "Mrs. Gurney——"

"Yes, Maud." The answer came from the dimness at the foot of the bed.

There was character in each of the voices, and as each woman heard that of the other, the realization of the truth of the voice-revelation caused her an uneasy sensation.

"I want to see her. And I hate this darkness."

Mrs. Gurney rose, and, walking quietly across the room, opened a door. "Antonia!" she said.

The clear light of an early summer

morning, rushing in the sick-room, chased away the shadows and caught high lights in the mirror, on angles of the well-kept furniture, and blazed on the ruddy blond head on the pillow.

The sick woman laughed. "Ah," she murmured, "how nice!"

In the next room there was the sound of a soft stir, and then a big, loosely-built woman, all curves, came in, the baby in her arms.

Maud Gurney drew herself up as the nurse gave the little creature to her, and looked down at it.

"Dear me, how homely she is!" she said.

The older woman watched her, a half-smile on her thin lips. The sweet, weak face, the beautiful blue eyes, the poor little faulty chin,—all these things told the story over again to the keen middle-aged woman, who knew it so well already.

"No uglier than all little babies are," she said, at length.

Maud Gurney flushed. "I know I'm

always saying idiotic things,—but I never saw one before,—and you're always so hard on me." Her lips trembled, and her eyes filled.

"Hard on you? Don't be a goose. I only said that she is as pretty as they ever are."

"But you looked at me," cried the young woman, this time with a sob.

Mrs. Gurney's half sneer changed to a strained gentleness. "Don't cry," she said, softly. "Antonia, take the baby away; Mrs. Gurney is too weak."

The Italian woman, with the phlegm of her kind, obeyed.

Then Mrs. Gurney poured out a glass of water and, lifting the slight figure of her daughter-in-law with one strong arm, held it to her lips.

"You were mistaken," she went on, tranquilly. "I meant nothing in looking at you. Besides, there is no reason why she should not be pretty. You are pretty."

"Oh, yes,—I was pretty enough;

George used to praise my dimples." She smiled,—a poor little smile of a vanity so visible as to be almost pitiful. Then suddenly, half raising herself and speaking hurriedly: "Mrs. Gurney, tell me, do *you* believe in Heredity?"

Mrs. Gurney turned her face away for a minute.

"You must not talk," she answered, shortly.

"Yes, I must. Tell me, do you?"

"You know that I do not believe in things."

"But Heredity is not Religion," persisted the sick woman, fretfully.

"No, Heredity is not Religion. Then —I *do* believe in Heredity. Why?"

A feeble cry broke from Maud Gurney as she fell back against her pillows. "Oh, I wish she could die! I wish she could die too!"

The older woman turned a shade paler, as if something had hurt her; but she answered quietly,—

"This is nonsense, Maud. You must

stop crying at once, or I will send for the doctor."

"I wish she could die! Why should she live? If it is true,—and it must be if even *you* believe it,—what will she be? With his qualities and mine, what can she be?"

Mrs. Gurney rose, her eyes full of a strange look of implacability. "Hush! She may be like you, and you are not a bad woman."

"Oh, *stop* talking so to me," the sick woman cried, with an energy startlingly foreign to her. "I know I am a fool, but I am not such a fool as you think! Let me go on,—I *will* go on."

With the strength of her weakness she conquered, and hurried on, saying that which she wished to say. "All this time I've been thinking and thinking. And if she has his qualities and my weakness,—oh, I know!—how can she be good? Why can't she die? I think God might let her die. Why, Mrs. Gurney, you don't know what it is to have no will. To

always be making up your mind to things you can't do ; to always give in to people just because you haven't the strength to have your own way. I was born that way,—I was born without a will. I didn't want to marry George,—I was engaged to another man, and he was a good man, and rich, and I liked him better than I did George. But George insisted, and I just couldn't say no. Don't you *see* how awful it will be if she's like me? I was only a goose, for I had no bad impulses ; but if I had had any, I should have been wicked. But she, poor little thing, has his blood, too!"

She burst into a passionate fit of crying as she finished, her thin little hands pressed tight to her breast.

Mrs. Gurney watched her with a sense of utter helplessness new to her. When people begin to think, no outside tenderness can shield them from pain, and Maud Gurney's pain must be borne by Maud Gurney as Mary Anne Gurney's pain was borne by Mary Anne Gurney.

At length the younger woman ceased crying, and wiped her eyes on one of her long yellow braids. "I know you always thought I was a goose," she said, her voice still broken.

Mrs. Gurney shook her head gravely. "I have meant to be kind to you, Maud; but I am not an agreeable woman, and I fear I may have been hard sometimes. If so, I beg your pardon, and I am sorry. About the baby,—I will do my best."

"But you don't believe that doing your best will do any good. I know you don't!"

Mrs. Gurney groaned. "What I believe has nothing whatever to do with the matter. She is not my child, and I shall never forget that. She shall be brought up to believe whatever Dr. Bell and Peter Wayne may choose to teach her. And in other things I will do my best."

The sick woman did not answer, and Mrs. Gurney saw that she had fallen asleep with the ease of great weakness.

* * * * * * *

An hour later Mrs. Gurney went slowly down-stairs, the baby in her arms.

Her slowness was the slowness of strength, and as she came into the old-fashioned parlour the brilliant light revealed a face in which strength was the chief characteristic.

It was the face of a woman a little beyond fifty, bony,—the brow square and full of thought, the nose square at the base with well modelled nostrils, and a straight pale mouth, shaded at the corners, which rarely moved except when she spoke. Her chin was prominent and ugly, with a cleft that gave it an oddly masculine look. And on the whole face was stamped the shadow of a great suffering, either past or under a rare control. As she came in, the two men awaiting her turned from the window where they stood looking out on the sunny lawn.

Dr. Bell, the clergyman, known to them both years ago as Billy, but who had long been "William," and Peter Wayne. "Good-morning, William; good-morning,

Peter," she said, and together they answered, "Good-morning, Mary Anne." Wayne took the sleeping child in his arms, and after a short pause Bell began, a certain professional pomp in his voice: "Our Father which art in Heaven——"

Outside the window a robin was singing, and from afar came the hum of a lawn-mower. Mrs. Gurney stood with folded hands and looked around the room.

Wayne, his grotesquely ugly face bent over the baby, a quiver of tenderness on his great mouth, listened reverently. On the wall beyond, the shadow of Bell's head moved absurdly, as his bearded chin wagged with solemnity. Then her eyes fell on the little dark face of the baby, and her mind flew back to the sudden access of intuition that had so surprised her upstairs.

She smiled grimly, and a jagged scar on her cheek stood out white against her brown skin.

"Poor Maud,—poor little fool," she

thought. Then catching sight of her tall black figure in a mirror, she shuddered and turned away.

The sun went under a cloud, leaving the ugly, old-fashioned room dark for a minute; then it came slowly back. She watched the strengthening of the shadows indifferently. Suddenly Wayne was giving the new-made Christian back to her, and she realized with a start that it was over. "May God bless her, Mary Anne," he said.

"Thank you, Peter. Thank you, William. So, Miss Violet Elisabeth! Now we will go up-stairs. I hope," she added to Bell, with a little sharp laugh, "that you spelt Elisabeth with an s? She told me to tell you, and I forgot. It seems that she hates 'z;' it is such a scratchy letter!"

"Poor child," said Wayne; "how is she?"

"She is dying; William, she wishes to see you."

Dr. Bell put his Prayer-book in his

pocket and straightened up with a satisfied air.

Before he could speak, she went on, laughing, "I know what you are thinking of, Peter Wayne. You are remembering the other time you stood Godfather in this room! There is very little difference, isn't there?"

"You are right, Mary Anne," he answered, hastily, his mouth twisting horribly in his efforts at self-control. "George's child is the same to you as your child."

She frowned. "I didn't mean that, and you know it. Besides, your success as a Godfather that time wasn't brilliant enough to make you vainglorious. I will take her up-stairs now. Good-bye. Thank you, William."

The clergyman coughed. He was a man of conscience and did his duty, but he was afraid of this woman with whom he had trundled hoops fifty years ago.

"May I not say, Mary Anne, on this

solemn occasion, that I hope this little creature may——"

"May soften my heart? My dear William Bell, do you not know that I am too clever a woman to let Time, that refuge of the half-witted, blunt my perceptions of what has been in the past? I know that you are a good man in your way, and that Peter Wayne is the dearest and best of men. Must I not know, then, that my son George was a—scamp? He was bad, and you are good. Can I help knowing the one fact any more than I can help knowing the other? Have you anything more to say?"

He shook his head sadly. "No. Only that I shall pray God to teach you the truth."

"Good-bye, then; go up to her. And remember that 'Violet Elisabeth' is to believe all that you good ones believe. She is not my child."

When Bell had gone up-stairs she turned to Wayne, and her face softened: "Dear Peter!" she said, gently.

"Mary Anne,—you say 'because she is *not your* child,'—does that mean that if she were, in spite of everything——?"

"Yes," she returned, shortly. "My failure was my fault, or his,—but not the fault of what I taught him. Now, good-bye."

Wayne did not answer. He stood looking after her as she ran easily up-stairs out of the light into the darkness.

CHAPTER II

"'WASH the butter in iced water until it is of a waxy consistency,'—I should call that waxy, shouldn't you, Beth?"

Peter Wayne held the mass of butter towards her as he spoke, his big hands red and covered with beads of water that clung to his greasy skin like dew-drops.

The child was sitting on the table, her thin black cotton legs hanging down, the toes turned in. She wore a long white apron tied behind in a bow. Her two brown pigtails hung one over each shoulder.

"Yes, I think it's waxy, Uncle Peter," she said, with a slight stammer; "your hands are w-waxy, too."

The old man laughed. It was very delightful to him,—the tidy kitchen, with its gleam of copper and tin, the roar of

the big, highly-polished stove, and the rush of the wind that shook the frosted panes in their sockets. On the table stood an array of cooking materials,—a rolling-pin, a pan of flour, a pan of chopped ice, a quart cup, a knife, and salt. The big, spotted cook-book—Miss Parloa's—was opened at the page devoted to puff-paste. Wayne and Beth were making their Christmas "surprise" for Mrs. Gurney. Last year it had been an English plum-pudding. This year it was to be "oyster-crab patties," the crabs coming from New York, the "patties" being now in process of making.

The little girl watched every movement as Wayne worked, her pale face aglow with interest. She was not a pretty child; her regular, modelled features were unchildish and rather hard, her straight black brows too marked. But her small personality was distinctly individual, and meant something.

For a little while the old man worked in unbroken silence. He chopped the

butter into the flour, and then skilfully rolled the paste on the board. Twice he folded it, and spread it flat again; then he laid it in a tin pan filled with ice, and covered it with a small fringed serviette.

"Thus endeth the f-first lesson," observed Beth, turning cautiously in her place and eating a bit of ice.

Wayne sat down. "I wish you wouldn't say that. It is from the Service of God, and ought not to be quoted lightly."

A flash of amusement crossed her face, giving it for a second a strange likeness to her grandmother. "Mustn't I say 'Let us pray,' either? What if I wanted awfully to pray this minute, Uncle Peter?"

"You don't," he answered, shortly.

"I know I don't; but if I did?"

"Sometimes I think you have no reverence in you," he burst out suddenly, his face a deep red. "Tell me, Beth, do you always say your prayers?"

"No, I don't." Her small face, as angry as his own, was white. "I hate going to

church, and I loathe saying my prayers. I hate *all* such things."

"Child! Do you mean you hate God?"

Even in her wrath, a quiver of amusement at his horror came to her red lips.

"Oh, no, I don't hate God. I—just don't seem to *realize* him."

He recoiled with an intensity of feeling almost ludicrous. "You don't realize God? Beth, come here."

She jumped down from the table, and came to him, laughing nervously.

"It's time to roll it out again, Uncle Peter," pointing to the paste; "and it's getting late, and it's going to snow *like the devil!*"

"Be still! The paste can wait. Now tell me what you mean."

She shuddered. "Let's not talk about such things. I—hate to. It makes me —thirsty and s-sick. I was only teasing you, Uncle Peter."

"You were not teasing. Tell me. What did you mean?"

Then, seeing that it was to be a duel between them, the child's face assumed a look of invincible obstinacy.

"I was only teasing. I always say my prayers, and I like to go to church."

Catching her hands in his, he held her tight, and, looking into her eyes, said, slowly, "That is a lie, Beth."

She drew herself up proudly, and tried without struggling to get away from him.

"That was a lie, Beth. You have told me a lie."

"I haven't. It wasn't. You hurt my arm, Uncle Peter," she said, impatiently.

"Tell me that you are sorry."

"I am not sorry. I have n-nothing to be sorry for."

Then he dropped her hands, untied his blue apron, and, rolling down his sleeves, left her alone, telling her to wait till he came back. As he left the house he heard her shrill little voice singing loudly, "Over the Garden Wall."

Five minutes later Wayne burst into Mrs. Gurney's sitting-room, where she sat

bending over her embroidery. "Mary Anne," he cried, without greeting her, "she has told me a lie!"

Mrs. Gurney looked up with a slight smile. "And you are surprised, Peter? She has always lied."

Wayne stared at her for a second without speaking. Then: "Mary Anne! She has always lied? Beth?"

"Beth."

He turned to the mantelpiece, and, reaching down a big white pot-pourri jar, plunged his great nose in it.

"And you can say it so quietly, Mary Anne Gurney?"

"And I can say it so quietly, having known it now for some six years."

He looked up, his face distorted with pain. "Oh, my God! what can we do?" he said.

Mrs. Gurney drew her silk carefully through the linen before she answered, without looking up.

"We can do nothing, Peter. It is not her fault."

"Not her fault?"

"No. Her father was a liar. It is in her blood. George always lied, you know."

"And whose fault was it that George lied? Whose fault was it that he believed nothing? Mary Anne Russell, you are responsible for much evil."

As she paled under his words, the long, jagged scar on her cheek, softened by time, became visible.

"Stop, Peter! I refuse to be insulted in my own house. I tell you the child has always lied, and that, as it is bred in her bone, we—you and I—cannot change it. She is very clever, and lies well. That is some consolation. George was not quite clever enough to be a good liar."

"Woman!" he shouted, grotesque in his fury. "Hold your tongue, or the God in whom you refuse to believe will smite you to the earth!"

She rose, and laying her hand on his arm: "Come, come, Peter, dear old friend, what is the use of exciting your-

self? I respect your prejudices. Respect mine. The child has good qualities. She is affectionate,—though she tries to hide it,—she is generous, and she has brain. She *will* lie. Let her. Ignore it. She will never lie to hurt any one. Her generosity would prevent that. One quality qualifies another, all the world over. As to my son George, you, as an honest man, can hardly take his part."

Wayne groaned. "But you are his mother."

"Yes. And although I am his mother, I am a woman with a brain in her head, who cannot belie her own knowledge. I know that he was a useless, vicious man all his life, and at the end,—dishonest."

Her face was calm as she spoke.

"Mary Anne, at the end you cannot know what he was. Before the end he had done his best."

She laughed nervously as she sat down and took up her embroidery.

"Of course I know that. You have told me often enough."

"And the mercy of God is infinite."

She shrugged her broad shoulders impatiently.

"If there *were* a God, Peter, He could not be a weak sentimentalist who would forgive twenty-six years of utter badness in recompense for the cries for pardon of a dying man, terrified by the unknown. Religion has its good points, but its great weakness is a tendency to lapse into absurdity. Now, you had better go, for my mouth is full of bitter words that want to be said."

He set the white jar back in its place, and took up his hat. His face, remarkably ugly as it was, was beautiful in its expression of tender pity.

"Good-bye," he said, holding out his hand. "The time will come, Mary Anne."

Then he went, and left her alone, bending over her embroidery. She was nearly sixty years old, and looked, in spite of her upright figure, older; but her black eyes were strong as those of a

hawk, and the delicacy of the work before her was rarely lovely. For an hour she bent over the frame, her straight lips pressed tight together, her nostrils stiff. Then she rose, and deliberately put away the embroidery frame, folded the silks away in a little yellow plush bag, and rolling the shreds of ruffled fluff that hung on her gown into a ball, threw them into the soft-coal fire. Then she stood a few minutes looking out into the snow.

"Poor Peter," she said aloud.

CHAPTER III

VIOLET ELISABETH GURNEY grew rapidly, developing new angles and new lengths of bone, almost to the naked eye. She was not a pretty child, and being born vain,—of that vanity that hides itself jealously,—she suffered from her ugliness, which she exaggerated. Other girls were fat, with nice thick ankles and red cheeks, slightly raw in winter, which was delightful. She herself was hard and bony, with long, narrow feet and pointed ankles, and her colourless, oval face only gathered colour in the nose!

Bella Lacy, her best friend, a heavy, good-natured girl with high red cheeks and greenish-blond hair, was for years Beth's admiration and adoration. For Bella, she begged cakes of her grandmother's cook, and then with rapture watched Bella's leisurely feast.

White cakes gleaming with varnish-like frosting, small fruit cakes bulging with raisins and hickory nuts, caramel cakes, all these were offered at the shrine of Bella Lacy, who ate them without enthusiasm, licking her finger to pick the crumbs from the generous roundness of her young bosom. Bella Lacy wore corsets!

Beth longed for corsets and a bustle with all the ardour of her thirteen years. Bella Lacy wore heels, and lovely, ready-made Pebblegoat shoes, whereas her, Beth's, calfskin boots, laced tight to support her constantly turning ankles, were made to order, which was the cause of the bitterest shame to the child. She copied Bella in every way; mispronounced words, ate pickled limes which gave her the creeps, and tried to learn to keep her mouth slightly open. Mrs. Gurney's sharp eyes missed none of these signs.

"Beth, why do you say 'oar-inge'?" she asked, one day.

"I don't know. Do I?" The little girl put down the chop bone that she was gnawing.

"Yes. And you say hawr-rible. Why? Is it because Bella does?"

"Because Bella—— Why, Grandma! You don't think I copy her, do you? She's the stupidest girl in school!"

Mrs. Gurney was silent. But though she said little she saw much. She watched the tragedy of Bella's desertion of the two years younger Beth for a "new girl" at the Academy. She laughed at Beth's brilliant, curt characterization of the new girl, and she observed that the crying at night only lasted two days, and that the child's sudden delight in Pauline Murray, a girl whose father kept a fashionable "drug store" on Main Street, was loud in inverse ratio to her real love for the gentle, dark-eyed, "Lime-drop girl."

"You see, Peter, I was right," the old woman said, one day. "It is her first instinct to present to her little world a false impression of herself."

"She is shy. She keeps her own affairs to herself."

Wayne was turning the pot-pourri jar between his hands as he answered:

"I don't like gushing girls."

Mrs. Gurney repressed a smile, but did not answer.

When Beth was sixteen, she was confirmed. Dr. Bell and Wayne walked home from church together.

"William," Wayne asked, "what do you think about it? How did she take her instruction?"

"Just as all the other girls did. They are not easy to impress, these young things. I sometimes think we confirm at a too advanced age. Girls at fifteen and sixteen are full of the excitement of dawning womanhood; they are beginning to be vain,—to try their wings——"

Wayne listened absently. Dr. Bell's abstract wisdom had no charm for him.

"I am deeply interested in her, you know," he said, after a pause. "She is full of possibilities."

"Oh, yes, she's a smart girl. Mary Anne's unfortunate opinions——"

"Have nothing whatever to do with Beth," interrupted Wayne, loyally.

"Beth has been in our hands from the beginning, William."

They had reached Wayne's house, and paused.

"Well, Peter, I have done my best, and I'm sure you've done yours. She seems very reverent, and has given me no trouble with questions, as some of 'em think it smart to do. Further than that I can't say. She is very reserved."

Wayne's face lightened as he held out his hand. "You're right, Peter,—that's exactly it. She is reserved to a most rare degree. All her life she's hidden her feelings. Good-bye. Give my love to Etta."

That afternoon, after dinner, to which two o'clock meal Wayne had been invited by Mrs. Gurney, the two sat together in the sitting-room.

Beth, curled up in a ball in an easy-

chair, was reading Tennyson. Wayne watched her curiously. He had not been able to detect any sign of excitement in the girl beyond the fact that she had talked so rapidly and continuously during dinner that he had been unable to speak to her seriously, as he wished to do.

In this rapid fire of talk he felt her old embarrassment in speaking of solemn things. And a certain little shivering movement of the shoulders and a fleeting expression of *malaise*, almost amounting to nausea, had been her only reply to his solemn blessing when he had first reached the house. Suddenly, as he watched her, she looked up. "Uncle Peter, do you know Jim Porter?"

"William B. Porter's son? Yes."

"Well, he's going to marry Susy Lawton."

"Is he? How old is he?"

"Twenty-one. And she's only nineteen. Absurd, I call it," she added, with an air of wisdom.

"And they say that Sally McLean is

flirting with Tom Wade, and that his mother hates it."

"Who tells you all this stuff?"

"It isn't stuff; it is true. And if *I* had a son, I shouldn't allow him to flirt with married women. And she is a perfectly hideous old thing, too."

Wayne's eyes twinkled suddenly.

"Her personal appearance hasn't much to do with the question, though, has it, Beth?"

"It *always* has to do with the question, Uncle Peter! Were you ever in love?"

He drew nearer, and bent his bald head, gleaming in the Easter sun, to her. "I'll tell you if you'll tell me! I was once. Were you?"

"I! Bah! Never. Do you know, Uncle Peter, I don't think I'll ever fall in love,—it makes me quite,—I don't know, *woozy* to think of it." She gave a comic shiver, and, her grandmother coming in just then, went back to her book.

The next day, on taking her place in the First Room of the Academy, she found

a bunch of hot-house violets on her desk.

"Dear me, Beth, aren't they sweet? Who sent 'em?"

Bella Lacy, much the same as she had been three years before, leaned over the aisle as she spoke.

"No idea," answered Beth, promptly, her face crimson with excitement, her heart beating. "It was either the Professor or Billy Curtis," insisted Bella, gently.

"The Professor!" Beth rose, and, going to the small tilted glass in the corner, arranged the violets on her bodice, pinning them with a hat-pin.

"It was he, it was he!" she said over and over again to herself during the morning.

It was by no means the first time that the girl had felt her heart beat.

At the age of ten she had loved a "big boy" whose woolly black curls were beautiful to her, and the breaks in whose changing voice gave her delicious thrills.

At this time she was known as the most

reckless tomboy in town, and was supposed to be utterly free from the sillinesses of other little girls. Then a cousin of Bella Lacy's came to spend the summer in Deepwater, and this time her love was reciprocated, until when, on leaving, the youth, enterprising for his thirteen years, wished to kiss her good-bye.

He went away with a bound-up eye and wrath in his heart, and Beth, trembling all over with horror, occupied herself with Miss Yonge's praiseworthy heroes for several months.

Then at fifteen she had been advanced to the First Room, and promptly fell in love with the "Professor," a young Harvard man who wore a red carnation in his button-hole every day in the year. She read a great deal in Bartlett's "Familiar Quotations" at this period, looking out verses appropriate to the situation.

The other girls had their vulgar little love-affairs with the "big boys," but Beth was excluded from their sentimental con-

fidences on account of the supposed hardness of her heart.

She accepted, and even encouraged this idea. She had no need of confidants, and enjoyed her pose of being superior to those weaknesses which were in reality hers more than those of the others. And now, with ankle-long skirts and turned-up braid tied with a chaste black velvet ribbon, she knew that she was on the verge of a crisis. Billy Curtis, a Yale "man," a football hero, the owner of the biggest house in town, was not only in love with her, but he was going to propose to her! While she went through her lessons with her usual rather inaccurate brilliance, the girl's hands were ice-cold.

At length, during the last hour, the class in Greek was called, and as usual, the door, opening a little late, admitted young Curtis, who was polishing up his Greek for the near Exams at New Haven.

Beth was deep in a book when he came in; too deep to bow to him, but not too deep to at once see every particular of

his costume, even to the modest buttonhole of violets in his lapel. He was a big, broad youth, with an honest, undeveloped face, and a hazy, yellow moustache, under which his fresh red mouth looked too large. As he sat down, Beth looked up —shyly. He saw the violets, and flushed.

When the releasing bell rang, Beth hurried to the hall, put on her jacket and hat and fled from the building as though chased by a devil.

It was her honest wish to escape the coming interview that impelled her to hurry.

While that interview was in the future, its delightful possibilities of thrillingness had enchanted her; but now, for some reason too subtile for her to analyze, the old feeling of disgust towards emotions swept strong over her.

All her life it had been so. Artificial emotions she loved. Real ones were abhorrent to her. And she had, with the wonderful feminine instinct that is as strong at sixteen as at twenty-six, felt

something in Curtis's young eyes that warned her that the reins had slipped from her hands to his.

She was flying along over the wet spring pavement, when he came up behind her.

"Beth! why didn't you wait for me?"

"Why should I wait for you, Mr. Curtis?"

"Mr. Curtis! But you are wearing the violets, anyway," he answered, glancing at them.

In her agony to escape, she stopped short, and, taking the flowers from her dress, looked at them doubtfully.

"They are from *you*, then!" she said.

"Of course they are. From whom did you think them?"

"From Mattie Thompson. She often puts flowers on my desk. Oh,—I—I don't think Grandma would like me to wear flowers a gentleman gave me!"

This access of primness was so well played that Curtis was staggered.

"Oh, I say!" he began, and then was

silent. And in silence they made their way up the street.

The double rows of trees were frothy with green promise of summer, and the lawns, spongy and brown, were sifted over with pale fresh grass. The old houses, dignified and plain for the most part, under the tall trees, the uneven red bricks of the sidewalk, the "lot" in the middle of a block, where later two cows would graze, —all these things were characteristic of the small *old* American city.

Beth walked on, bowing with a certain solemnity of her own to the few wayfarers, chiefly hungry business men, hurrying home to luncheon or dinner, Curtis bending forward at the waist in a certain decrepitude much cultivated by the very young at that time.

At length they reached the gate of Mrs. Gurney's garden, and she held out her hand.

"I—I want to tell you something, Beth; may I come this afternoon?"

"I am going to Miss K-Kitty Blair's,"

she returned, with her slight stammer. "I am to be one of her bridesmaids, you know."

"To-morrow, then?"

"To-morrow some of the girls are coming to spend the afternoon."

Curtis flushed. "Beth,—I am going day after to-morrow. Wait a minute,—please don't go——"

But she had slipped within the gate, and without turning, forgetful of the dignity of sixteen, flew up the front path and into the house.

CHAPTER IV

THE church was full. From behind one saw a sea of shoulders, and, like any other homogeneous collection, it was a study.

There was the generous display of the mon "chic" society of the town. White shoulders and yellow, fat, with slight billows towards the roots of the hair, and scrawny ones suggestive of plucked birds. Shoulders that gleamed bluish in the lamplight as the Blanc de Lys stiffened, shoulders scaly with rice powder.

Then there were black and brown and grey silk shoulders. These belonged to the old-fashioned "set," who were mostly Presbyterians.

The half low-cut gowns, too low to be high, too high to be low, belonged to those who worshipped both God and Mammon,

and who found it answer very well, the Bible to the contrary notwithstanding. And here and there bloomed the beautiful perfection of a Paris gown,—a Worth or a Paquin. And in these cases splendid jewels crowned the perfection.

In no other country in the world exists such a state of society as one finds in small cities in the United States.

The wife of the millionaire, enjoying her millions to the top of her bent, can be, and often is, the intimate friend of the Bank Cashier's wife, who is the daughter of the "China-Store" man, and lives on less than a thousand dollars a year.

It is a survival of simple old times, and though its disadvantages are obvious, long may it last. The stranger who seeks the American Snob must seek him in the great Eastern cities, where the society is almost cosmopolitan. In the typical small city the snob does not exist.

The church was sweet with the odour of flowers, but no artificial perfume was

in the air. American women do not use perfume, whereas the English have already begun to imitate the French woman's fad of having "*un parfum particulier*." Down the middle aisle, white satin ribbons were knotted about great plumy bunches of white lilacs, and the chancel was a mass of palms and azalias.

"It is very pretty indeed," whispered Mrs. Gurney to Peter Wayne. "But I wish they'd come."

"They will in time. Wedding-parties are always late," he returned, philosophically. "Yours was. How does she look?"

Mrs. Gurney laughed. "You are an old goose, Peter Wayne! Your vanity in that child is something absurd."

"I know it. But—tell me."

"Well,—she looks rather plain, and carries her head strangely with her hair up. But you'll see."

Then the organ burst out, and every one turned half around, so that the study in shoulders was transformed to a study

in profiles, which as a rule are very unsatisfactory.

At length, down the aisle they came. John Owen Blair, with his pretty daughter on his arm, a priceless lace veil falling frostlike from her head to her heels; then the bridesmaids. Six.

Beth Gurney, being one of the tallest, came last, with a Miss Tilney, from New York, a school-friend of the bride's.

"Well, I declare!" murmured Mrs. Gurney, behind her fan, to Wayne. "She has her mother's diamond star in her hair!"

Her head, crowned with the pile of dark hair, well up, her hips held back in a way she had learned in seeing Miss Tilney walk across the room, Beth marched down the aisle, perfectly calm, and indeed looking rather bored.

The way of arching her brows had also been copied from Miss Tilney.

"She is beautiful, Mary Anne." Wayne's voice was exultant. Then the music stopped, the crowd ceased surging, and the service began.

Beth stood gracefully, her clear-cut, slightly hard profile turned to the Best Man, Gordon Blair, the bride's brother.

The diamonds in her hair lent a strange note to the picture. They changed her face and gave a new dignity to her figure. She seemed to have changed all at once from a thin, angular child to a beautiful young woman. And she knew it.

Towards the end of the service the girl in front of her began to cry. "Stop it, Mary. Your nose will be horrible," Beth whispered.

Then the bridal pair passed by, and she fell in line with Bennie Welch, one of the ushers, a leading spirit in things social but unpleasant as to complexion.

In the dressing-room at the house, Beth took a small rag of chamois-skin from her pocket and rubbed her nose with it.

"What have you there, Miss Gurney?" asked Miss Tilney, curiously. "Powder?"

Beth felt that the other was amused, and flushed.

"Yes. I hate shiny noses; don't you?

May I lend it to you? It is Pozzoni's,—but perhaps you do not like Pozzoni's,—I have had very little experience."

Miss Tilney bit her lips. "Thanks. I never use powder."

Half an hour later Beth was seated at the "bridesmaids' table" between Mr. Welch and a Boston man, a friend of the groom's.

The table, with its array of silver and flowers, the little bouillon cups with two handles, the salted almonds,—all these things, as well as the champagne glasses, excited her strangely. She was grown-up at last!

But though she was hungry, she could not eat. Bennie Welch, scorning her sixteen years, devoted himself to the girl the other side of him, and Mr. Poe, the Boston man, devoted himself to the supper, which came from Augustin's, in Philadelphia.

Opposite Beth sat Gordon Blair—the Beautiful Gordon Blair and Miss Tilney His dark head had a way of bending to

hers as he spoke, that Beth found enchanting.

Beth had not seen him since she was a small child, and his really striking, Spanish-like beauty gave her a mixture of keen pleasure and jealousy.

Miss Tilney was only a colour-beauty, she told herself contemptuously, and dreadfully old at that. She must be twenty-four!

Blair, she knew, was six years older than Miss Kitty, which made him twenty-eight.

"I am too skinny now," the girl thought, dispassionately, "but in two years I'll be much prettier than she is, with her frizzled hair."

"Miss Gurney!" Beth started. Blair was leaning towards her through the flowers and ferns. "May I have the third waltz?"

"With pleasure," she returned, calmly.

He bowed, and went back to Miss Tilney, who said something to him in an undertone and laughed.

The third waltz came. Beth was standing with the Bishop who had married Kitty Blair. Blair and Miss Tilney were seated together on a small sofa.

The waltz was the "Blue Danube," and, as it began, Blair sprang up and offered his arm to Miss Tilney. Beth watched them dancing as she talked to the Bishop of his eldest granddaughter, who was her friend.

Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and anger, and her yellow-brown eyes looked black.

The next dance was a polka. She danced with Welch and then went back to the Bishop.

Presently the orchestra began another waltz, and Blair appeared, leaving Miss Tilney in her corner.

"May I not have this waltz?" he asked. "I—am so sorry,"

Miss Tilney was smiling as she looked on.

"Thanks," answered Beth, politely, smiling at him as she fanned herself. "I

think I won't dance ; I haven't seen Bishop Morgan for such a long time,—you will excuse me ?"

She took the Bishop's arm as she finished, and with a cool nod dismissed Blair, who had never been more surprised in his life.

The Bishop, who knew the world, smiled to himself, and led Beth off to a seat, where he gave himself up to being amused by her.

Blair went back to Miss Tilney.

"Funny little thing," he drawled ; "quite turned me down."

"It's a pity she's so thin," returned the young lady. "She is really almost pretty."

"Don't care for living skeletons. Shall we finish this ?"

CHAPTER V

TWO days later Beth Gurney stood before the mirror, viewing the effect of a new blouse. It was a dark red silk blouse, trimmed with little brass buttons, and fitted well.

"The colour is good," she decided, as she laid down the ivory hand-glass and turned around; "but I have no waist at all."

Taking off her snakeskin belt, she carefully bored a hole in it some three inches farther back than the last one already pierced, and then, with set lips, proceeded to pull herself in. It hurt.

"I shall soon be used to it," she said aloud, trying to get a full breath, "and it *looks* splendid!"

Then she sat down, and, tilting the swinging-glass, proceeded to go through a series of poses, which she named aloud

as she took them: "Pensive,—proud,—babyish——"

She twisted and turned as she spoke, viewing her head from all sides. It was a pretty piece of acting.

"The pensive one suits me best,—the babyish, least. My nose is too long for that. Yes, the dreamy one is the best. That takes the bun. Oh, I wish I were eighteen. It's all lost on that goose of a Billy."

At length she rose, and put on her hat. "I'll go over to Belle's and find out about the dance last night," she said, as she rammed the pin through her hair.

Just then she saw from the window a man opening the gate. Her heart stood still. Then, tearing the hat from her head and throwing it on the floor, she rushed down-stairs and into the parlour. Her quick brain had made its plan. A few seconds later the door opened, and Blair came in.

"Miss Gurney!"

Beth did not answer. She was lying

on the rug, with her head against a chair, asleep.

Blair hesitated. She was very pretty as she lay there, her face on her arm, her hair ruffled, her lips parted. The book on the rug beside her was open. It was "Lancelot and Guinevere" he saw.

"By Jove!" he said.

Then, leaning down, he kissed her.

She stirred, turned her head, and made a motion with her hand as though she were brushing away a fly.

"By Jove!" he repeated.

A minute passed; then another. At length he was about to go, when she awoke. Slowly, gracefully, rubbing her eyes and stretching her arms.

When she saw him, she started, rose to a sitting posture, and said, slowly, "Mr. Gordon!"

Then she got up, and arranged her ruffled hair. "I—I was asleep," she said, with her slight stammer.

"So I saw. But, now that you are awake, won't you ask me to sit down?"

"Of course. I am very glad to see you. Grandmamma is ill, unfortunately, —perhaps I can give her a message?"

"I did not come to see your grandmother, Miss Beth; I came to see you."

"Oh!" Her manner was perfect. Not a trace of pique, not a suspicion of flutter.

"I wonder what you were dreaming when I came in?" he began, leaning back in his chair.

"I wasn't dreaming at all. I hope I didn't snore?"

She had a sense of humour which often saved her from absurdity.

"No," he laughed; "and you looked awfully pretty."

"That is satisfactory, at all events. May I give you a cup of tea?"

"Thanks. I should be delighted. I didn't know Deepwater was civilized to the extent of tea."

"It isn't. I am the pioneer of civilization. Let us go to the sitting-room. I loathe the parlour."

When they were seated again, she

having called the maid and ordered tea, she began:

"When did Miss Tilney go?"

"How did you know she had gone?"

"Eh, *mon Dieu!*" she cried, with a little gesture learned from the Frenchman who passed his summers teaching in Deepwater, and from whom she had acquired her very good accent.

"You are right. She left this morning."

"And you are wearing the willow."

"And I am wearing the willow The willow seems to be the favourite 'buttonhole' for the men of Deepwater. Curtis is a moving willow-tree, Miss Beth."

"Curtis is a ridiculous boy."

The tea had come and she began her preparations.

"So you think a man ridiculous because he is in love?"

"In fiddlesticks! Billy Curtis is twenty, and I am sixteen. *Just* sixteen. It's absurd. I haven't any patience with such idiots."

He laughed. He had a pleasing, low laugh, that disclosed very beautiful white teeth.

"So you are sixteen!"

"Yes. Please don't say 'sweet sixteen.' It is horribly *banal*, and then so untrue. One might as well say 'sweet green apples.'"

"Isn't it something new for ladies of sixteen to wear diamonds in their hair?" he teased, stirring his tea.

She laughed; chuckled. "Wasn't it a joke? Of course you know I stole it from Granny. She was furious, but I found it very becoming, myself."

She had at once felt that her grown-up airs did not impress this man as they did Billy Curtis, and fell back into the naïve without an instant's awkwardness.

Blair was as much amused as he had expected to be.

"I thought so, too. May I have some more tea? This is rather weak."

He stayed an hour, during which time she kept him laughing almost without

ceasing. At last he rose to go, and held out his hand.

"Good-bye. I am off to-morrow. Please remember me very kindly to Mrs. Gurney."

"Good-bye. Bon voyage."

When he had gone, Beth went up-stairs to her grandmother's room. Mrs. Gurney was in bed, with a cold.

"Mr. Gordon Blair was here to say good-bye," she announced. "He is a beautiful dear; but, oh, Gran, he is stupid!"

"Is he? He was not a clever boy, but he was a very nice boy. Beth, I think you had better telephone to the doctor. My side aches badly."

The next day Blair left Deepwater, and Beth felt that life was a burden for nearly a week.

CHAPTER VI

"GOOD-MORNING, Mr. Wayne. Mrs. Gurney wants to know if you won't come over and see about them roses."

Hank Burrows, Mrs. Gurney's man-of-all-work, put his head into the open dining-room window and gave his message without ceremony.

"Good-morning, Hank. Won't you have a cup of coffee?"

The man grinned and wiped his gleaming face on his shirt-sleeve. "Wal, I'd jes' as leave, if you'll hand it out here. I ain't fit to come in this morning. Ben working in the sun."

Wayne poured out the coffee and carried it to the window.

"How are things at your house?" he asked, reseating himself.

"Hm. If I was you, Mr. Wayne, I

wouldn't go over. She's in an awful temper. Scolded me about them gladiolys, —but I just let her scold. Poor woman," he added, after another draught. "The 13th September is always a real hard day for her, I know, and wimmen must scold when they takes a notion. Does 'em good and don't hurt no one."

Wayne's big mouth twitched, but he did not laugh. "You certainly do know the world, Hank," he remarked.

"Wal, no. But I know her. And she's good in the main. A real kind woman, Mr. Wayne."

"That she is. And the shock she had, —*we* can't imagine what it was to her."

"I d'no. It was bad enough for me, too. Just such a day as this it was, hot enough to make a clothes-horse sweat. I was squirting the hose, an' all at once she called me from the window. 'Hank,' she says, 'come here.' She didn't yell, nor nothing, but my hair riz. And when I went up, there he was, stone dead, a-dangling."

"God help her."

"Yes. He was her boy, after all. I allays says so, when they pick him to pieces. He was her boy."

"You are right," returned Wayne, rising, and taking the empty cup. "It is not for us to judge him. Tell Mrs. Gurney that I will come in half an hour."

When he opened the gate he saw her kneeling on the ground by the front porch, a trowel in her hand.

"Good-morning, Peter," she cried, without rising. "Something's wrong with these late roses. They are what Hank calls 'minching.' What must I do to them?"

Wayne sat down on the step and took off his hat. "I'm 'minching' myself; aren't you? It is so hot,—I never knew such a September."

"I never *minch*. As to Hank, I could slay him. I hate a fool."

"But he isn't a fool. He's very keen in some ways." His eyes twinkled for a minute.

"Oh, *I* know what you mean. I've scolded him to-day until I am quite worn out. I've used bad language to him, I have threatened him, and he refuses to be angry. He listens to me with patience! To me!"

Her smile was angry. "It is enough to drive me mad. *I* understand him!"

"I think it very generous of him, Mary Anne."

"And you think, as he does, that I am a keeper of anniversaries? He thinks I ought to spend the day in the green room on my knees. I know he does."

"It wouldn't be a bad thing," Wayne answered, imperturbably.

"Rubbish. Now come into the house, where it's cool, and advise me about these roses. Then I have a letter from a clergyman in Dakota who wants old clothes. I am thinking," she added, leading the way to the side door, "of giving him those you have on now."

"These? Why, these are new, Mary Anne. This is my new suit!"

He looked ruefully down at himself, and took hold of his coat as if he expected her to tear it from his body that instant.

"New! You have had it over two years. The knees bag and the pockets shine. Besides, where else can I get clothes for my clergyman in Dakota?"

She stopped in the little oil-cloth carpeted entry and hung up her old garden hat. Then they went on into the cool gloom of the sitting-room.

"Where is Beth?" he asked, sitting down and reaching for the pot-pourri jar.

"She is—slumming. The new clergyman is zealous. He is also not bad-looking."

"Mary Anne!"

"Peter!"

"Don't be disagreeable."

"Don't be impertinent!"

"You deny her every good quality."

She shook her head, her face suddenly serious. "No. Don't say that, Peter. God knows I mean to be just to the child."

"You say 'God knows,'—Mary Anne, —dear——"

His knotty hands shook as he clasped them.

"Nonsense. Habit. *You* say it. Now don't begin, Peter Wayne. I *will* not be lectured."

"No, no; not lectured. Only—— It is seventeen years ago to-day since——"

"Since George Gurney hanged himself, and I found him. Why should I lie to-day more than on any other day? I have never lied in my life, Peter. But about Beth,—I am not unjust to her. I love her. She is dear to me, and she loves me. Then, she is kind. I never knew her do an unkind deed, and,—but she poses. Is that my fault? Now it is the slumming pose. She likes it, and does no harm, at least. She gives her pocket-money to the poor, and hasn't begun to borrow of me,—as yet."

"Yes, yes. But you. Beth is dear to me, Mary Anne, but you are dearer."

Her eyes softened. "I know, Peter.

And I am grateful to you. Only, you must not torment me about that. I do not believe in God,—do not try to make me lie."

"But George! God has forgiven him. He suffered, and repented. He is forgiven."

"Hush." She had risen, and stood before him, her hands clasped tight.

"Hush. I am an old woman now, and —weaker. Do you not *see*, can you not see? Peter, if there is a God, He is a *just* God, and not a weak Forgiver of Mortal Sins. If there is a God, my boy, my baby, is now in Hell, burning. Oh, go away, and leave me alone."

Her voice broke and she buried her face in her hands.

"Mary Anne, there *is* a God, and He can forgive when we must condemn. His Mercy endureth forever. Turn to Him, pray to Him, He is waiting for you."

"No. Do you think that if I could, I would be forgiven *my* sins now? And *he*, my boy, there in torments? God

help the world if mothers were of such stuff. No. Now go, Peter: I must be alone."

In silence he obeyed her, as he had always done. His heart was full, his eyes wet.

In the street, some children, playing at ball, turned to stare at him, and laughed at his great red nose.

But he did not hear; he was praying.

CHAPTER VII

IN December of that year Mrs. Gurney and Beth went to Florida. Orangewood is one of those delightful communities consisting of the winter homes of several rich Northern families, and an hotel, which form one of the most delightful kinds of Southern social life.

The Gurneys, nominally living at the Magnolia House, in reality slept there, and lived with the Pollocks, the Palmers, and the Wests, whose lawns slanted down to the oblong lake, beyond which, through the trees, one had glimpses of the Gérard's place, Seven Gables, and the house of their son-in-law, John Carey, a Chicago pork-packer, and a very charming man.

Mrs. Pollock was a sister of Peter Wayne, and an old friend of Mrs. Gurney. Mr. Pollock, a tall, bent, old man, with pain in his eyes and content

written all over his pale face, at once became Beth's adoration. His courteous Southern manners, his patience under a very real heart-disease, and his great love for his dainty little old wife,—all these things appealed to the girl, and drew from her a passionate love.

The old man saw her good side only, and grew very fond of the clever, frank child just turning towards womanhood. He took her for long drives through the pine forests; by small, still lakes, vivid blue amid the surrounding darkness; under moss-hung trees, to far groves, where he cut her oranges, and showed her how to drink the juice. He taught her much about the beautiful, delicate orange-trees, confided his fears of frost, let her "help" in the packing-house, and assured her that she was useful. Under his gentle influence she developed.

Loving the negroes, she played with their funny, round, black babies, helped the poor, talked to the men about the place, and soon had, as it were, learned

to put herself in the negro's place. She saw things from his point of view, caught his accent, and could tell a "nigger story" better than any of the old Orangewood people themselves. It was this faculty of adaptation that won her her niche in the hearts of the Pollocks.

The old people being of a beautiful, simple piety, the girl read to them from the Bible in the evenings, when her grandmother was not there. When Mrs. Gurney was present, Beth found some unobtrusive excuse for omitting the reading, and the Pollocks did not notice it.

One person not only saw, however, but understood the little manœuvre. Phil Pollock, the only son of the house, a hunchback, who sat for hours in utter silence, his big, velvety eyes resting quietly on the scene before him, had studied Beth Gurney from the day of her arrival, and his intuition took him far. He knew Mrs. Gurney's peculiarities,—he noticed her manner when his father and mother praised Beth,—her amused,

half-bitter expression as the girl "showed off,"—and he was deeply interested.

Twice he had heard Beth lie. Small, insignificant lies, one of them being merely a bit of picturesque embroidery added to the truth.

And he saw her eyes gleam with tears when his father had one of his attacks of breathlessness.

"Unlike most people, she is made of positive good and positive evil,—a study in black and white," he told himself.

And, being a thoughtful man, he realized that things cannot stand still,—that progress is as inevitable as death; and he wondered.

One hot afternoon Mrs. Gurney was at the hotel, sleeping off a headache, and Phil Pollock, stretched out on a steamer chair on the veranda, a book in his hand, was alone with Beth.

It was early in February, and the spaces between the roof-pillars before them were nearly filled with a swaying curtain of pendant vines, hung with great violet bells.

The lawn, green as the greenest moss, sloped down to the water fringed around with low shrubs full of bloom. It was very beautiful.

Beth was reading, her book on her raised knees, her thin arms crowning her head, as she leaned back in her long chair.

Pollock watched her a long time in silence; then, at last, he spoke.

"Beth," he said, "why do you read the Bible to my father?"

She started, and, swinging her feet to the ground, turned towards him. "Why, Mr. Phil?"

"Yes. Why do you do it?"

"Because I like to. Don't you like reading the Bible?"

Pollock pondered for a second; then he answered, slowly, "No. And neither do you."

Suddenly something chased the grieved look from her eyes, and she burst out laughing.

"Very well. I admit it. *Après?*"

"*Après*,—is it pose, or a wish to give

pleasure to my father? Honour bright, now!"

"Then, honour bright, Mr. Phil,—a little pose, and a great deal of the other. I *do* pose, and I'm 'indifferent honest,' but in that"—her eyes filled—"I *adore* your father."

"Thank you, Beth."

There was a few seconds' silence, then Pollock changed his seat, and sat down opposite her.

"Listen," he began, slowly, balancing his words. "You know what I am, Beth, —a cripple, a deformity,—and I am, moreover, nearly twenty years older than you. Will you let me tell you what I have, by quiet watching, found in you?"

Her face lightened with interest.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Phil."

"And,—you won't be angry? For I shan't flatter you."

"I will not be angry,—go on."

He leaned back in his chair and folded his thin, white hands, the fingers laced loosely together in a way he had.

"Then: First, you are very curious. That, I know, would astonish even your clever grandmother, who believes you quite the reverse. Secondly: you are a coquette in embryo. Molly West told me the other day that you hated men and loathed love-stories. This is not true."

Beth's mouth twitched, but she said nothing.

"Thirdly: you are very emotional. Fourthly: you are capable of real affection,—to a certain point. Fifthly: you are going to be a remarkably brilliant woman. Sixthly: your first instinct is to hide every real feeling you have, and to feign feelings you have not, in both of which cases you succeed. Lastly: you lie uncommonly well, and without the least conscience protest."

He ceased speaking, and looked at her. She was a little pale, and her eyes had a frightened look.

Then suddenly she held out her hand to him. "And this is the harvest of your quiet eye? Mr. Phil, you are a man-witch!

It is all true, every word of it, but—*how* could you tell?"

"As you say,—the harvest of a quiet eye, aided by glimpses from other people's view-points."

"Whose view-points?" she asked, flushing with the intensity of her interest.

"For example,—my father's. He is a clever man, my father, and yet he believes you full of a capacity for religion, that your word is truth itself, and, in short, that you are pretty near perfection."

"Mr. Phil, I never tried to—to fool Mr. Pollock. I can't tell you how it is, but when I am with him I feel good. I *am* good."

"Ah, that is just it. You are a chameleon, Beth. Whereas old Gérard confided to me that he finds you are *une endiablée gamine!*"

"I am—with him. He is a wicked old sinner, and he likes it." She paused, her eyes full of dreamy amusement.

Pollock lighted a cigarette and began speaking again. "Beth, you will have a

life not like the life of every girl. You will have experiences, trials, and pleasures keener than those of other women. Now listen. Under your chatter and your well-done frankness lies a very deep reserve. You will never have friends,—you will play to a public all your days. How would you like having me for your one friend?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, you will find a great relief in having one person to whom you show the *real* you, to whom you do not pose, to whom you tell the truth. Take me for that person."

She hesitated. "I see. But,—I am young. May I not find some one who would suit me better? Am I not too inexperienced to judge yet?"

"You are young, but I am not. Let me judge for you. No woman could be your real friend. A good woman you would shock, and men are not good confidants for a young woman. A man who would interest himself enough in you to

take the position would make love to you. Now I will not fall in love with you, and you do not in the least shock me. Another danger, that of an attempt being made by some one to *reform* you, does not exist with me."

"I — should like ——," she began, slowly.

He threw away the end of his cigarette, and leaning forward took her hand.

"Listen. One confidence deserves another. Let me tell you my story. I trust you, you see. Beth, there is a woman I love. I have loved her for fifteen years. She married another man, and I, grotesque little being that I am, still love her and dream of her."

"Oh!" she whispered, staring fixedly at his eyes.

"Yes. And I will tell you who she is. You have heard of Mrs. Morris Devereux?"

"The Beauty?"

"Yes. It is she. That is my story, dear. No one knows it but you and herself—

who no doubt has long ago forgotten it —in the world."

Her eyes filled with tears as he finished, and, bending her head, she kissed his hand quickly. Then she was gone.

Phil Pollock lighted another cigarette, and leaned back well content.

He knew that he had won.

CHAPTER VIII

PETER WAYNE was at the station—or dépôt, as the Deepwaterites usually call it—that day in late March when the Gurneys came home.

"At last, here you are," he said, as he met them and took their bags. "Beth has grown six inches, and you look *splendid*, Mary Anne."

Mrs. Gurney laughed. "My beauty must be striking, Peter. Yes, we are both well. Ah, there's Hank. How do you do, Hank?"

The man took off his straw hat, and shook hands with the two women. Then they made their way past the omnibus to the "hack" awaiting them.

"Hank'll bring the trunks. Go on, Thomas."

Beth leaned back, and beamed at the

familiar streets. "How nice it is to be at home, Uncle Peter! You have such a gorgeous new cravat that I hardly recognized you. What's the news?"

"Nothing in particular. The affairs of W. O. Blair were found to be much involved after his death. Gordon has sold the house. It's a good thing Kitty has married so well."

"I wonder Mr. Gordon doesn't marry, too," observed Beth, bowing to a man driving a grocery wagon.

"They *do* say that he's rather attentive to Anna Curtis,—but it may be only a yarn."

Beth burst out laughing, her white teeth flashing. "Anna Curtis! That would be casting pearls,—in the way of good looks, I mean. She is a most ghastly jay."

"I wish, Beth," put in her grandmother, "that you would wear your company manners a little more for our own benefit. I hate such expressions. And Anna is a very nice girl, indeed."

"If her beauty is skin deep, she must be really lovely, Gran,—for she has skin like tripe. Here we are,—there's Katie at the door."

Mrs. Gurney looked with satisfaction at the crocuses in the borders as they went up the path.

"Well, Peter," she said, comfortably, "there's no place like home."

"No place, for me, like *your* home, Mary Anne."

He went in with them, and stayed for luncheon. After it, Beth went out for a walk, and Wayne and Mrs. Gurney talked her over.

"I think she has improved," she said, hesitatingly, "She was very sweet with Nellie and Mr. Pollock. And she is fatter, don't you think?"

"She has a very distinguished carriage. Isn't she laced?"

"A little. Most girls are at her age. She'll be seventeen in two months. Dear me, how time flies!"

"When you are here," he improved.

"Peter, Phil is coming to see us during the summer."

"Phil!"

"Yes. And I fear,—I rather think he is in love with her."

"Poor boy! It would not be bad, Mary Anne, if she could overlook his —his misfortune. He is very clever, and—rich."

Mrs. Gurney laid down her embroidery, and made a comic face of despair at him.

"Beth! Violet Elisabeth Gurney marry a cripple! My dear Peter, how little you understand her!"

"Didn't she like him?"

"Of course she did. But she is one of those natures to whom suffering—moral or physical—is disgusting. It's a strong word, but it's true. When I was ill, she was pale when she had to stay with me. She flees disagreeable sights and sounds as other people flee unpleasant odours."

"You were always hard on her. What

about her slumming, as you used to call it?"

"Ah! That was a fad, hence unreal; and it is only the real that she dislikes. And I think I do her justice, Peter. She is going to be a very charming woman. This very sensibility to disagreeable things lends her that exquisite tact that *only* comes from self-interest. She will avoid people's moral corns all her life."

Wayne was silent for a time, sniffing thoughtfully at the rose-jar.

At length Mrs. Gurney said, "By the way, do you think that Gordon Blair really will marry Anna?"

"I only know what people say. His mourning, of course, keeps him rather out of sight; but Mrs. Cutler told me that he is a great deal at the Curtis's. It wouldn't be bad for him, if he's fond of her. I don't think he's clever enough to make a fortune for himself."

"No, I suppose not. Where is Billy Curtis?"

Wayne laughed. "Here. I saw him

yesterday. He asked when you were coming. He has proposed to Beth, I suppose?"

"I suppose so. She says he has not."

Wayne could not answer for a minute. Then he went on: "He is a nice boy; but they are both too young."

Mrs. Gurney laughed. "They may have been engaged for two years, for all we know, Peter. Beth does not betray her secrets."

The next day Beth blossomed out into the beauty of new summer gowns, which she had had made in New York on their way home.

The summer was a merry one. She and two other girls learned riding, and, with several young men, and a rather young matron as chaperone,—at whose appearance in such a *rôle* the gods must have laughed,—made a great many excursions to different points of interest in the neighbourhood, coming home by moonlight. Then they played tennis,

had theatricals, and life was altogether delightful.

Pollock, who came in August, confessed her, one day, and was much pleased with the *éclat* with which she threw herself into her part.

"Young Curtis is in love with you, isn't he?"

"Yes. And oh, Mr. Phil, no one but you knows that he has—asked me. Bah! I hate it! His eyes get wet, and it makes me quite sick to see him."

"Any other lovers?"

"N—no. Not exactly."

"Flirtation?"

"Yes. Gordon Blair. He went away in the middle of July."

"And you like him the best?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. He is perfectly beautiful. And when he looks at me,—my backbone quivers."

Pollock did not smile. "And his backbone?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He is awfully old. But I see him often, and

he always talks to me,—when Anna Curtis isn't there."

"Who is she?"

"She is Billy's sister. Hideous, but rich. He is poor."

"Aha!"

"Yes. But,—I know he likes me best. Oh, Mr. Phil, I do *so* like telling you. Sometimes I can't sleep: I just think all night of him. Do you think I am in love with him?"

Her cheeks were deep crimson, but her eyes were steady. Curiosity, interest in her own sentiments, these were the emotions she felt.

"No, you are not. The next man who comes will—wipe him out."

"Yes,—it's always so. Isn't it queer?"

Pollock did not see her again until the next summer.

CHAPTER IX

MR. FRANÇOIS POULARD, steward of the Pocahontas Club, stood in the door of that picturesque stone and shingle edifice and looked up the road. It was six o'clock, and the river to his left was a mass of gold leaf in the evening sun. François, a man of taste, gazed approvingly about him as he smoked.

"*Pas mal ça*," he murmured. "Not so bad for America." Then he sighed, for he was an exile.

Two years before, when the enterprise of Mr. Benjamin Welch had erected the club-house, three miles out from the city, François Poulard, whilom valet-de-chambre to the duc d'Aragnac, once maître-d'hôtel to the Princess Montalerto, Blackest of the Black at Rome, was by chance in Deepwater giving French lessons.

A stroke of genius on some one's part

effected his appointment to the post of steward to the club, and here he was still.

The man had seen the world, in his way, and Deepwater amused him deeply.

The old-fashioned, dull, respectable element of the town came but little under his eyes.

The "gay set,"—the word "smart" in its English sense had not yet reached Deepwater,—composed of eight or ten young married women, as many girls, and all the young men of the town, made the club their summer headquarters, and François, in his note-book, kept a curious record of their doings there.

Such a condition of society is by no means rare in small American cities.

The dulness of the old-fashioned set, given over to Church affairs, the Y. M. C. A., and the mildest of tea-parties, is surpassed in degree only by the astounding fastness of the "gay." The champagne, the cocktails, the pronounced flirtations in which the couples changed partners

from time to time as in a dance,—these things at first astounded the Parisian.

In other countries he had seen much the same thing, but in the half-world.

In other countries lines are clearer defined. And this was a phase of life entirely new to the man, and it interested him.

As he stood in the yellow light this particular evening, he drew his note-book from his pocket, and, leaning against a wooden verandah-pillar, wrote neatly, "The affair of Madame Barclay with young Hill is finished. She has now Mr. Page, and young Hill has been sent away by his Mamma."

When he had made his note, he walked along the verandah and called in at the window,—

"Eustace!"

"Sah!"

"Mr. Blair complained that the—how you say—*claret* was too cold last time."

"Yes, sah."

Eustace, in his shirt-sleeves, appeared at the window, polishing a decanter with

a cloth. Eustace was so very black that the Frenchman was always conscious of a feeling of surprise that the man understood his orders.

Just then, far down at the end of the lane leading from the highway, a moving, dark spot became visible. "Tiens! They come, Eustace," and the steward went back to his post.

"That will be Mrs. Carroll and Mr. White. Ten to one, *mon vieux!*"

He was right. The dark spot developed into a buggy, and in the buggy, beautifully dressed, sat the very attractive Carrie Carroll, with her present slave, the President of the First National Bank. The next pair to arrive was an exquisitely pretty girl with the most Madonna-like face, and a burly, red-necked, handsome Irishman, who had twice been Mayor.

François gave a genuine sigh as he recognized the pair. Not for their unchaperoned condition,—even his European soul was accustomed to that curious anomaly,—but as a tribute to the last

dinner given at the Club, when the lovely girl had been helped into the high dog-cart at nearly twelve o'clock at night,—too much intoxicated to walk alone.

Little by little the big common-room filled, and the air hummed with talk and laughter. François handed liqueurs himself, and there was in his rigid face not a trace of his thoughts, which was quite as well.

"Mame, another cocktail?" John Lester called across the room to another man's wife. "Good for your headache."

"Don't care if I do, John. Thanks. Lots of bitters, please."

"Note," thought François. "American ladies wear very pretty petticoats."

Just then a coach came rumbling up. A coach as perfectly appointed as one could see at the Derby, and crowded with perhaps as well-dressed a lot of men and women.

The conversation was rather noisy, and too much of it devoted to wine and cock-

tails, but the women were charming, taken as a whole.

"Dinner is served."

Then at last the tables were filled, and the soup-silence fell.

The steward smiled as he recognized the raison d'être of the dinner at the yellow table.

"So that was true," he thought. "*Mon Dieu*, she is plain. And he!"

Across the room was a small party of six, composed of two old people and four young. The beautiful girl in the big feathery hat was Beth Gurney, but a new Beth.

A slim, well-developed girl, with rounded hips and broad shoulders. A girl too pale still, but with a sort of light in her transparent skin that was beautiful, and lent a wonderful brightness to the dark eyes.

She had moreover acquired a "manner" during the last year which she had spent at a New York boarding-school.

The man beside her was a stranger, a

gay little chap with a seal ring and an eyeglass.

It was the first monocle Deepwater had seen, and excited a certain amount of curiosity.

"Tremendously handsome man, Miss Gurney," he was saying; "a Deepwater man?"

"Oh, yes. He is our Village Pride, I may say. His sister is Mrs. Horace Wendell, of Boston. You may know her?"

"I don't, but I wish I did! And is he actually going to marry the girl on his left?"

"He is, indeed. She is very nice, too."

Humphrey nodded. "Very good, no doubt, according to the law of compensations."

Beth laughed lazily. "You are cruel. Besides, I, personally, am not at all sure that the advantages are all on one side. Anna Curtis is not at all stupid, and Mr. Blair, I believe, is none too clever."

The girl opposite shrugged her shoul-

ders. "You *believe?* You certainly ought to know, Beth!"

Humphrey turned his glass on Beth inquisitively.

"I? Oh, yes, I've seen him several times since I've been 'grown up;' but he might almost be my father, Clara, and of course considers me a mere babe."

Clara Hill laughed again, and turned to the man by her. The Hills, *père et mère*, ate their dinner placidly, and paid little heed to the talk. They were of the old-fashioned set, and did not, as a rule, have such good dinners as this very excellent *table d'hôte*.

Beth watched the yellow table unobtrusively. Billy Curtis, who had recently proposed to her for the third time, was there, and indeed his presence explained her absence. But while her quiet eyes took in every particular of the other table, she talked on with Humphrey without showing the least distraction.

There was much champagne drunk by the different groups of people, and much

good wine, well served. Towards the end of the dinner toasts were drunk.

François did not miss a note, and, like all people of theories, what he saw presented itself to him in a confirming light.

When at length Blair, who was seated beyond a pillar, succeeded in bowing to Beth, François caught her cheerful return nod, and he said to himself, "Tiens, he has burnt his fingers a bit then, *Monsieur le Fiancé*, but she, she is *grande dame*, and cold!"

Beth flirted delicately with Humphrey through dinner, and when they were once more in the big hall, he sat down by her and continued his talk.

Crême de Menthe, Curaçoa, and coffee were served, and François watched the floating together of the various "pairs" whom the dinner might have separated. The big willow rocking-chairs were rocked a trifle farther back than before dinner, the poses were rather relaxed, some of the men were flushed, and some of the women a little noisy.

The steward watched curiously. He had only lately convinced himself that behind this vulgarity there was in reality very little evil.

Anna Curtis, in whose honour the yellow dinner had been given, sat back in her place and strove to look at ease.

Her rough, reddish skin, her heavy, yellow hair, with green shades,—the yellow of fresh olive oil, her uninteresting grey eyes,—of all these things she was conscious.

Beside her, head and shoulders taller than any other man in the room, stood Blair, stirring his coffee, and looking perhaps more perfectly comfortable than he felt.

At length she spoke. "Gordon, have you noticed how pretty Beth Gurney has grown?"

"Very."

"She is such a nice little thing, too; so unaffected. Ah, here she comes!"

Blair drew back to let the girl pass, and

then, as she sat down, some one spoke to him.

"I haven't been able yet, Miss Anna, to wish you joy," he heard her say, in her well-modulated voice. "But I do, indeed. Of course, I think Mr. Gordon is splendid, you know. All of us young fry do."

"Thanks, Beth."

"I'm sure you will be awfully happy. You see, I am rather enthusiastic because he has been nice to me, and not snubbed me, as the older men often do the—'kids'!"

The slang word was not ugly as she said it, with a little deprecating laugh. Then she rose and held out her hand. "I must go back; good-night. Good-night, Mr. Gordon; I wish you much joy, too." She gave him her hand and smiled at him, then went back to her seat.

Half an hour later she slipped unseen from her place and went out on the verandah. She walked to the farther end, and stood leaning against a pillar, looking

up at the sky. "Oh, my God! my God!" she whispered.

Then hearing a step she turned, knowing who it was.

"Beth, why do you treat me this way?"

Her face looked ten years older than in the ingénue pose of a few minutes before. "What do you mean?" she answered, drawling.

"I mean,—I mean you wished me joy, —*joy*, as you would have to a perfect stranger,—it——"

She laughed in the moonlight, and held out her hand. "Then,—*dear* Mr. Gordon,—really and truly I hope you'll be very happy. Will that do?"

Blair held her hand in both his for a minute, and then with a curt "Thank you" left her.

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

THE carriages were crowding down the Corso, back from the Pincio, and the wonderful, narrow street was thronged with pedestrians.

Overhead, the pale primrose sky, underfoot, the dampness of a Sirocco day, and in the air the languid softness of February.

Billy Curtis, as broad across the shoulders of his light coat as any two of the Italians who ran around him as he made his way towards the Piazza Colonna, was nearly four years older than the day when he had put the violets on Beth Gurney's desk in the Deepwater Academy.

His moustache was shaven, and his chin had grown squarer. Otherwise he was much the same, and a typical American in his well-cut clothes and high, turn-down collar.

At length, tired of contending with the crowd, he left the street, and went into a confectioner's. He sat down at a marble table, ordered a Vermouth, and sat for some time watching the pretty women who came in to buy bonbons and small, glazed cakes.

It amused him to see the intensity with which the important choice was made between a pink cake or a pale-green one, and the way the small, gloved hands fluttered over the gaudy array like butterflies. But behind his amusement was a care, and his face showed it.

Presently two men, seated at a table behind him, attracted his attention. The one a thick-set young fellow, in the black and magenta Bersaglieri uniform, the other a much smaller man, who wore the unmistakable look of being an artist.

They were talking earnestly in Italian, with vivid gesticulations, and at length the officer, taking a pencil from his pocket, began to draw on the marble table.

The other man watched him, an amused

smile under his small moustache, and then, suddenly snatching the pencil, burst out in French: "*Mon Dieu!* it is a libel. See here,—*there* she is! There's her neck, and the line of her hair, and her adorable nose, in one flourish."

Curtis understood vaguely, and the delight on the Italian's face prevented his turning his eyes away.

"Oui, oui, Maxence, ze comprong,—ah, belle, belle!"

The Frenchman laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and rose, followed by his companion.

When they had left the shop, Curtis, going to pay at the cashier's desk, made a slight détour, to glance at the sketch.

It was Beth's head! He stared at it for a second, then flung a lira at the smiling cashier, and rushed out into the now lamp-lit streets.

Quite by chance he turned to the right, and, crowding his way through the slow-moving mass of promenaders, came on

the Frenchman at the corner of the Via de' Condotti.

"Pardon," he stammered in French, "may I speak to you a minute?"

"*Certainement.*"

"Do you speak English?"

"No, unfortunately."

Curtis mustered his courage, and went on: "You sketched the head of a lady on the table just now, in the café,—do you understand me?"

"Yes. I meant no offence, if the lady is known to you. It was that I forgot to efface it."

Curtis did not heed his bow. "No, no,—it is not that; but I know the lady, Miss Gurney, and I want you to give me her address."

"Monsieur, a thousand regrets, but it understands itself that I cannot do so."

"But I know her, I tell you. I have known her all my life."

"Then——"

The man's gesture annoyed the American intensely.

"Her grandmother gave me her address at the Hôtel Bristol,—do you understand me?—but she has left there."

"Monsieur speaks a remarkably good French," answered the Frenchman, bowing again, "and I regret to be disobliging. *Mais*——"

Then he put on his hat, and slipped away.

Curtis stood still for a minute, and, with a few words under his breath, went on.

It was maddening to him, and perfectly incomprehensible, that this detestable little Frenchman should know where she was, and he, Billy Curtis, who had played with her when they both wore sashes, should be seeking her in vain. In a furious temper, he went back to his hotel.

Beth had come to Europe shortly after his sister's marriage, and now that event was nearly two years in the past. For nearly two years he had not seen her, and now, when he had come to Italy on purpose, she had disappeared.

"Her grandmother was crazy to let

her come with that Sally Frazer, anyhow," he growled, as he made his hasty toilet for dinner. "She always had bats in her belfry, even if she *is* Kitty Blair's sister-in-law. And a cracked old maid is always wilder than other fools."

He ate his dinner in moody silence, and after it went out for another walk.

He had thoughts of telegraphing Mrs. Gurney, but he knew that the old lady would not cable back. She would write.

It was maddening. Only one thing was sure,—Beth was still in Rome. He would stay on, and haunt the most frequented streets until he met her.

At length, walking without seeing whither he was going, he came to a theatre, and following the crowd being easier than threading his way out of it, he went in.

The play was "La Locandiera," with Duse in the title *rôle*. In spite of his anxieties, in spite of his knowing not one word of Italian, Curtis was carried away

by the wonderful woman, and thoroughly enjoyed his evening.

At length the play was over, and he rose with the rest. He was nearing the door, when suddenly, ahead of him, he caught sight of her whom he was seeking. It was she beyond a doubt, a light scarf over her loosely done hair, her cheeks scarlet with pleasure and excitement. Beside her was Miss Frazer,—old Sally Frazer,—in a light blouse, with a black lace mantilla looped over her gray hair. And with them,—the obnoxious Frenchman!

Curtis scattered the immediate crowd as a stone thrown into water scatters drops, and, disregarding the angry remarks about him, pressed towards the door. In spite of his efforts, however, he was too late. They had gone, disappeared; and he was obliged to give up the search for that night.

He went home through the half-empty streets, past the beautiful fountains, by the Forum of Trajan, seeing nothing,

hearing nothing. He had seen Beth, and that was enough to render him blind and deaf even to Rome. He had loved her all his life, he thought, and then,—she had grown so beautiful!

CHAPTER II

IT may be doubted whether, among all the hordes of vandals and ignorants who descend on Rome in her old age, there was ever any one who less appreciated and enjoyed what he saw than Billy Curtis, the first ten days of his stay.

And yet he was, though not a man of artistic tastes, a University man, whose family had been rich for several generations, and a man who was not more dull of brain than nine youths of his age out of every ten.

Yet to him Rome was a desert. The pictures passed before his eyes unseen, the Vatican merely confused him, and the Forum made on his imagination no impression whatever. For the first time in his life, Curtis was bored.

Every afternoon he went to the Pincio and searched for Beth, then he visited the theatres in turn, paced the Corso by the

hour, and went to the English church on Sunday. In vain.

Rome is a great city, and with all his pains he did not so much as catch a glimpse of her. He had several good letters of introduction, but they lay untouched in his trunk.

The only wish he had in the world was to see Beth Gurney, and every day he realized more clearly that he might search for months without finding her.

At length, one beautiful moonlight night, the concierge of his hotel, a man of taste, persuaded him to go to the Coliseum.

"The first dark night they will light it with electricity, which is a sight to be avoided," the intelligent Swiss told him.

Curtis took a cab, and at length found himself in the great arena.

It was almost empty, by chance, and the young fellow felt his heart beat as all at once Roman History became to him, under the mighty influence of the old building, not a series of lessons, but a living, palpitating force in the world. He

sat down and smoked thoughtfully for an hour, watching the shadows sharp cut against the brilliant moonlight, and dreaming dreams. At length he rose, and started towards the exit. Several groups of people were now scattered in little blots of shade over the vast moonlit space, and the silence was broken by voices.

Just as Curtis reached the door, two people came down the steps to the right.

"Beth!" he cried.

She started, flushed, paled, and held out her hand. "You, Mr. Curtis! What a surprise! Neroni," she added, turning to her companion, a tall man wrapped in a dark cloak, at the collar of which gleamed a brass clasp. "Dov'è la Sara?"

"Sarah, Miss Frazer was with us a minute ago, with Count Savrigny," she explained, hastily, to Curtis. "How long have you been in Rome?"

"Won't you introduce me to—your friend?"

She laughed nervously, and then turn-

ing to the Italian, said in French, "Monsieur Curtis, Neroni, one of my friends from America. Lieutenant Neroni."

The two men shook hands, and Curtis saw that the Italian was the officer of the café.

As the introduction was being made, Miss Frazer bustled up, leaning on the Frenchman's arm.

"Ah, Beth, what is it? who—Mr. Curtis? You in Rome? I am delighted to see you. Maxence, an American friend, Monsieur Curtis. Comte de Savrigny. This is delightful."

This time Curtis bowed without offering his hand. The Frenchman's eyes danced as he saluted gravely. Then there was an awkward silence, broken by a chuckling laugh from Miss Frazer.

"You will be surprised to hear that we have an apartment, Mr. Curtis! It is a secret, though, so you mustn't tell! Come, let us go. We will have a chafing-dish supper. Maxence, be an angel and get some cheese, will you? Then we'll do

well enough. I am *so* glad to see you again, Mr. Curtis!" She took Curtis's arm, and they led the way out to the cabs, the other two following.

When they were seated, and the horse went clattering madly back towards the city, Curtis tried to understand what it all meant.

Opposite him sat the two women. Miss Frazer, now radiant, rattled out to him the delightful tale of her final emancipation from the trammels of society. Beth, her Tam o'Shanter too much tilted over her too loose hair, was rosier and plumper than she had ever been.

The Italian, wrapped in his brigand cloak, did not speak.

"It is too jolly, Mr. Curtis! I am, you see, as excited over it all as if I were sixteen instead of fifty-two! I am working under Galtani, and we live the most independent of lives. Count Savrigny found us the rooms,—quite in the artistic quarters,—and we have been there all winter. Beth speaks Italian like a native——"

"A native of America," interrupted the girl, laughing. Then she subsided again into silence.

"I think Mrs. Gurney knows nothing of this change in your plans," Curtis observed at last, hesitatingly.

"Of course she doesn't. If Beth wrote her grandmother, her grandmother would tell, and then Mr. Wendall, my brother, would shut me up in a lunatic asylum. The stiffness of Boston is beyond conception, Mr. Curtis! Besides, I certainly am old enough to take care of myself,—and to chaperon Beth, don't you think?"

The carriage stopped as she spoke, and Curtis helped the ladies out, while Neroni subdued the cabby, who was exorbitant in his wishes, and loud in the expression of them.

The stone staircase was narrow, and perfectly dark, until Neroni lighted a small candle that he had in his pocket.

To Curtis, in his ignorance, the condition of the entrance was something horrible, and his disgust was not abated when

Miss Frazer opened the door of the apartment with a latch-key.

The house was dark, but Neroni, without speaking, found a lamp and lighted it, then carrying it into the studio with the air of one perfectly at home.

"Now sit down, children," cried Miss Frazer, as she disappeared around a big black and gold screen. "Max will soon come with the cheese. Neroni, will you make an omelet?"

Neroni bowed. Curtis thought that the young officer seemed to share in some degree his own discomfort, and the idea attracted him to him.

Beth sat down, slowly took off her cap, and threw back her cape. She wore a dark velveteen blouse, above which her well-cut, delicate face rose like a flower. Curtis could not take his eyes from her. She was stiff and ill at ease, at first; then suddenly, jumping up, called Neroni, and the two set to work to build a fire with pine cones in the tiny, three-cornered grate.

"Voici le *cheese*," announced Savrigny, as he came in. "I am an angel boy!"

"Oh, your English, Max! Speak French; Mr. Curtis will understand you better."

Beth turned a flushed face from the fire, and laughed.

Savrigny smiled at her, and arranged the chafing-dish on a little table near the lamp.

"Lippo mio,—are you going to make an omelet?"

"Yes. But first,—*prima*,—*d'abord* ——" The young fellow stopped short, his face red with embarrassment.

"Never mind Mr. Curtis, Neroni," called Miss Frazer from the darkness beyond the screen. "And never mind that *animal* Max. What is it?"

Of all this Curtis understood not a word. But two things he knew,—that he liked Neroni, and that he detested Savrigny.

He listened to the noisy talk, and watched Beth. She had overcome her

first embarrassment, and was now excited and rather noisy. Every time she called the Frenchman by his name, Curtis started.

The supper was good,—an omelet with truffles, and the Welsh rabbit, at which Savrigny made faces, and which the Italian vainly struggled to eat. There was red wine in a flask woven in a net of reeds, and white wine in a bottle.

When every one was tired of eating, Curtis rose.

"It is late,—after eleven," he began, when Savrigny interrupted him.

"First you must see the picture. *The* picture!"

"Yes. Will you look at my picture?"

Sarah Frazer's innocent eyes touched him strangely, among the absurdity and vulgarity of her surroundings, as she looked up at him.

"With pleasure," he murmured.

Savrigny took the lamp, and, holding it high above his head, led the way into the darkness.

Curtis knew nothing of pictures, but when the lamplight fell on the canvas he was startled, the half-finished painting before him was so grotesquely bad.

He looked up. Savrigny was sneering, Beth looking the other way, and Neroni had not come at all. Miss Frazer's lips quivered with anxiety, and her eyes glistened.

"Tell me,—what you think?"

"What could any one think," put in Savrigny, "except that it is a wonderful picture."

She smiled gratefully at him. "Oh, you, Max, you always flatter me. Tell me, Mr. Curtis."

"I think," said Curtis, slowly, looking at Savrigny with something like defiance in his eyes, "that it is very beautiful, Miss Frazer."

"Ah! Really? Oh, I am so glad. For all my life I have felt that I had talent, and could not develop it. I have longed for years and years to study, and I had some fears that—I was too old."

Her eyes filled, and she turned away. "Come. I am an old idiot. Thanks, Mr. Curtis. Thanks, Maxence."

"I have not had the pleasure of Mr. Curtis's acquaintance for long," said Savrigny, slowly, "but from the first minute I have recognized him as a man of taste."

Without quite understanding this remark, Curtis was angered by it, and, making a hasty appointment with the ladies for the next day, took his leave.

As he reached the street, Neroni came hurrying after him. "Mossieu," he began, in very bad French, "pardon me, —you have known Mees Gurney long,— in America, is it not so?"

"*Oui, oui.* Why?"

The Italian hesitated, then holding out his hand, clutched Curtis's, and said, impetuously, his beautiful, soft eyes full of tears, "I like you,—ze vous aime, you are good."

"Good Lord!" cried the American, reddening. "I don't speak French," he

added, hastily, in that tongue. "Awfully sorry. Good-night."

Neroni watched him mutely. "I suffer," he murmured, reproachfully. "My heart is heavy."

The last words, uttered in careful English, were so unexpected that Curtis could hardly repress a laugh. He shook the other man's hand warmly, however. "So is mine, old man," he answered, in his own tongue.

CHAPTER III

WITH the unerring "scent" of jealousy, Curtis felt that his rival with Beth was not the Italian, but Savrigny, although the Frenchman had not in the least devoted himself to her.

Neroni's state of heart was almost ludicrously visible, but Beth's manner with him, free and easy as it was, was quite satisfactory to the American.

On the other hand, his not too brilliant faculties at once seized something in the way she spoke to and looked at Maxence de Savrigny that smote him to the heart.

"She is in love with that wretched little monkey!" he told himself, over and over again. "Beth Gurney!"

And he was right. From the first, Savrigny's open cynicism and picturesque little person had appealed to some hitherto untouched note in the girl's nature, and his apparent indifference to

herself achieved the rest. Proud as she was, and conscious of her beauty, her superior mind, and her *youth*, which, unlike most girls, she appreciated at its full value, Savrigny had an influence on her that almost frightened her, even while she deeply enjoyed it.

He scented his hair, and while she railed at the habit to Sally Frazer, calling it vulgar, and "hair-dresser's assistant," yet the odour delighted her. His scraggy red cravats pleased her, too, and the apparent carelessness of his toilet.

And while, setting down at their real value all the man's pretences and mannerisms, she told herself that he just missed being a gentleman, yet the sound of his step sent the blood dizzily to her heart, and brought a pulse to her throat that nearly choked her.

"I am a queer mixture," she wrote at this time in a locked book, the key of which she wore on a chain around her neck; "and of all the studies and sciences that exist, it seems to me that

there can be none so fascinating as the science of self-knowledge: I suppose because one is inside one's self, and can get down to the springs that make one go."

There was in her a very rare honesty —towards herself. She played none of the graceful comedies before her own mind in which most people excel, and, never having known the sensation of shame in her life, regarded her own faults and weakness with tranquil eyes.

In a word, towards her own never-ceasing, curious inspection, she was morally another Eve,—naked and not ashamed.

The meeting with Curtis was intensely disagreeable to her. She realized in a flash all the discomforts sure to arise from the introduction of such an element into her present life, and felt at once a superstitious certainty that his coming was the beginning of the end. For, like many essentially irreligious people, she was extremely superstitious.

Then, with a sudden reversal of some brake within her, her gayety had come back, and, incited further by her innate wish to hide her true feelings from every one but herself, she had rushed into an exaggeration of her usual easy manner with the two men, feeling herself to be a little vulgar, but not caring.

Only one thing mattered: that no one should suspect that for a minute she had been ill at ease and embarrassed.

The next afternoon Curtis called, bringing a great bunch of lilies-of-the-valley. He found the room full of people, strange-looking men and three girls. One of the men, whose cuffs were decidedly dirty, was kneeling by a small table, modelling Beth's head in clay. One of the girls, a little blonde, lay back in a steamer-chair, her eyes closed wearily with a weariness that did not extend to her jaw, as she was chewing gum enthusiastically. The other two, big young women with abundant figures and high colours, dressed exactly alike in black-and-white check

gowns, sat together on a divan, playing on guitars and singing. In another corner Savrigny lay stretched out on two chairs, smoking. Miss Frazer, enveloped in a big blue apron, was at work on her picture, while a small man in a black velvet cap, sitting by her, made suggestions, from time to time, in a low voice.

"How do you do, Mr. Curtis?" Miss Frazer held out her hand. "Max, get up and give Mr. Curtis a chair. Oh,—Mr. Curtis, the Signorine Savelli, Miss Cole, Signor Bauli, Professore Caccia, and Herr Grube."

Beth only smiled at him, without moving. "I don't dare get up, or he'd slay me,—it's just at a critical point."

Her black silk collar lay in her lap, and her round, white neck was bent.

Curtis sat down in one of Savrigny's chairs, and looked about him.

"There is tea and boiling water," Miss Frazer said presently, "but every one is too lazy to make it. I will, in a few minutes. Professor Caccia is so kind

as to advise me a little about my picture. Have you seen his 'Phryne'?"

Curtis had not.

"It's a great picture,—a very great one," she observed, gravely.

"Bice, sing '*Au clais de la lune,*'" called out Savrigny.

"I can't. Mimi can't play it."

"Mimi, talk a little English for Monsieur Curtis," the Frenchman went on, lighting another cigarette.

Mimi Savelli laughed. "Blast my eyes, you are a daisy," she said, in a delicious, slow contralto.

Every one roared.

"An English sculptor taught her. Isn't it absurd?" Miss Frazer's innocent old eyes were crinkled up with fun. "Say some more, Mimi."

"Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay, Rudyard Kipling, Goddam."

Beth laughed, too, a little nervously. "Neroni is twice as funny," she said. "Ah, here he is. Lippo, say your poem for Mr. Curtis."

Neroni smiled at her, took off his sword, and began promptly: "Mary 'ad a little 'amb——"

Without a laugh, without the least embarrassment, he went through the rhyme.

Curtis laughed with the rest.

"Thanks," he said. "Delightful. Who taught you?"

"Mees Gurney."

Then Miss Frazer, who had made the tea, called him to hand the cups.

The two Italian girls took six lumps of sugar each, and Savrigny, rum.

There were cakes and a flask of wine on a side-table.

Curtis learned, listening to the talk, that Mimi Savelli was studying singing,—for the stage, and that the sisters lived alone in the same house with Miss Frazer and Beth. He also learned that Herr Grube was fond of Bice, who offered him crumbs of her cake and sips from her cup. The English girl did not talk at all.

At length Beth rose. "Now, my chil-

dren," she said in French, "I am going for a drive with Mr. Curtis. Ta-ta."

"Mr. Curtis is a lucky man," laughed Savrigny. "One of your English poets says, 'After all, old things are best,'—eh, Beth?"

Curtis would have enjoyed kicking him.

"Why do you let that beast call you Beth?' he asked, when they were seated in the cab.

"Who,—Max? Why, we all of us call each other by our first names. We are in Bohemia, my dear Billy."

"They are Bohemians, and you aren't."

"And Sally?" she asked, looking at him innocently.

"Oh, Miss Frazer? No. She's only crazy, I think. What can she be thinking of?"

After a pause, she began slowly: "Isn't it touching, Billy? About her picture, I mean. I could cry sometimes when she talks of it."

"Then how can you let her believe in it? Beth, come away from these people. They are all vulgar, and—dirty, most of 'em. I don't like those Italian girls, and the little blonde looks as though she took opium."

"She does. Or rather, she did. She paints beautifully, and is really the nicest of them all."

"That's easy, as far as I can see. Beth, how can you stand them?"

"I know; but they are amusing and kind, and poor, dear Sally is having the time of her life."

Curtis hesitated.

They had nearly reached the English cemetery. The spring sun flooded the plain with light, and the air was sweet after a shower.

"And Savrigny," he went on, at length, "he is a disgusting little puppy. He—doesn't treat you as he should, Beth."

She flushed angrily. "I am very fond of Max. Now, if you've said enough

disagreeable things about my friends, let's talk of—sealing-wax and things."

"You know why I've come, of course," he said, quickly. "Beth!"

Her delicate brows drew together. "Don't, Billy. It's no use. I can't, and I won't, and—*booh!*"

Her little shiver was perfectly genuine. His emotion, being real, was hideous to her. He did not answer, and they sat in silence until the cab stopped at the gate.

"Let's go to Keats only. It is late, you know," she said, jumping out.

He followed her over the little bridge, into the old cemetery, to the enclosed grave. It was covered with violets.

Beth's eyes glowed. "How lovely!" She felt the keenest pleasure in this unexpected artistic effort of nature, and, while he picked her a little bunch of violets, she recited the "Ode to a Nightingale," in a soft, deep voice, the modulation of which gave her exquisite delight.

Curtis watched her finish. Her pose, most natural, the tears in her eyes, the

little tremble in her throat,—all these things affected him, though he disliked poetry, and had never read a word of Keats in his life.

"Come," she said, at length; "we must go."

And respecting her silence, he did not speak a word during the homeward drive.

CHAPTER IV

TWO or three evenings later, Curtis met Neroni on the Pincio, and they walked down the Corso together. Curtis was unhappy, and at his wits' end about Beth. The people among whom she was living grew more distasteful to him every day, and now, at last, tired of his attempts to persuade her to leave them, she had quarrelled with him. Almost in utter silence the two men made their way down the street,—Neroni's eyes full of a monkey-like sadness, Curtis's face, less expressive, simply morose.

When they came to the street where Curtis should have turned off to go to his hotel he stopped, and with a sudden idea, born of his utter forlornness, and shrinking from solitude, he exclaimed, "Will you dine with me?" Then in careful French he repeated the invitation, pointing to his mouth expressively.

Neroni's face brightened. "*Volontiers*, —much pleasure,—*Ze suis très triste ce soir.*"

That he was sad that evening required, in fact, no announcing, and Curtis nodded sympathetically.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"Suppose you choose the restaurant,—my hotel is full of gabbling old women," he added savagely, in English.

Neroni pondered a minute, and then nodded. "*Si*,—I know," and taking Curtis's arm, he led him through several narrow streets to a door freshly painted white, over which hung the device: "Trattoria Fiorentina."

They passed down a narrow sanded passage, and then turning to the right, entered a small room in which were fitted six little tables, covered with coarse, fairly clean linen.

Across the passage, the kitchen door was open, and a portly cook, in dingy white and a square paper cap, was busy with his preparations. Two young women,

one of them extremely pretty, with a row of thick little corkscrew curls bobbing on her forehead, were helping him.

"You like it? You find it nice?" queried Neroni, anxiously, unhooking his sword, and sitting down. "*Très gentil.*"

The two men were seated by the open window; beyond, in the tiny brick court, a little old fountain spluttered feebly in the clear amber evening light. Over the tall cedar that grew on the other side of the wall, one star looked steadily down.

Curtis liked the quiet. He was desperately tired, and leaning back he shut his eyes.

"What will the gentlemen have?"

A fat waiter stood by them, a clean serviette over his arm.

"Order, won't you, Tenente?"

Neroni nodded, and asked the servant what there was.

"Maccaroni alla Milanese, Maccaroni with truffles, Maccaroni alla——"

"Milanese. What else is there?"

"Cutlets fried in crumbs, fried fish——"

At length Neroni had completed the order and the servant withdrew.

"One eats well here,—you like maccaroni?"

"Oh, yes," returned Curtis.

The young officer leaned over the table and laid his slim brown hand, with its half-inch-long little-finger-nail, on Curtis's sleeve.

"Dear you," he said gently, in his Italian French, "your heart aches, too. The love gives much pain."

Curtis shook him off impatiently. "What on earth do you mean?" he answered. "I have a headache,—*mal à la tête.*"

Neroni shook his head sadly. "You do not love me," he murmured. "I love you very much. You are very *simpatico. Basta!* You will not tell me,—I cannot help." Then he, too, subsided into silence, and they awaited the coming of the dinner.

"May I tell you about me?" he began again, timidly, sprinkling grated cheese liberally into his soup.

"Yes, yes."

With a terrible noise the soup disappeared, and then he went on.

"You know,—I love her,—Mees Gurney."

"Oui. I know, not being blind." The last three words in English.

"*Eh bien!* I love her very much,—I die for her."

He bit the loin out of a chop much as a cannibal might bite out the calf of the leg of a well-fed missionary.

"*Mon Dieu, que ze souffre!*"

His eyes were beautiful, but his manner of eating disgusted Curtis, who tried not to look at him.

When the salad came, and Neroni drenched it with oil and shovelled it into his mouth with the aid of a bit of bread, the American could stand it no longer, and turned to the window.

"I cannot eat," he said; "my head aches too badly,"

Neroni, whose appetite was untouched

by his woe, finished the salad and fowl, and ate all the caramel custard.

Then, placidly picking his teeth, he said,—

"Thank you, Monsieur,—a very good dinner."

Curtis nodded, and poured out a glass of oily black wine, which he drank without water, to the other man's evident astonishment.

The amber light had faded now, or rather concentrated itself, into a few brilliant stars. The plashing of the little fountain was the only near sound, the kitchen doors being shut.

Curtis drank a second glass of wine; Neroni took coffee, and then lit a long, slim black cigar.

At length the Italian began to speak slowly, choosing his words carefully, but with an evident determination to say all that he wished.

"As soon as I saw you, I knew that at last there was somebody whom I could ask. You are a gentleman, you are *sim-*

paticone, and—you knew her in America."

Curtis nodded. He saw that the other man's confidence was not to be avoided.

"Will you tell me something of her family?"

"She is an orphan. Mother and father dead, you know. She lives with her grandmother," answered Curtis, reluctantly.

"And she is of good blood?"

"Good blood! You can see for yourself."

Neroni shook his head, "*Ma foi*,—that is what Maxence says,—I can see for myself. But I cannot. I only can see that—that I love her, and wish to marry her—if I can."

"Look here," exclaimed Curtis, sitting up, "I might as well tell you, Neroni. I'm sure she won't have you."

"Have me? *M'avoir?*" Neroni's brows were puzzled. As he spoke, Savrigny came in, in evening clothes, a gardenia in his coat.

"*Tiens!* how nice this is! Giorgio,

bring me an omelet and a bottle of Capri. So you have been dining together, eh?"

The idea seemed to amuse him.

"As you see," growled Curtis.

"Max,—what is 'have me'?" put in the Italian, eagerly.

"Never mind, Neroni," interrupted Curtis; "I'll tell you to-morrow, *domani*."

"No, no, now, Max," he went on in Italian.

When he had finished, Savrigny laid his hand rather kindly on his arm, and said, "Don't be a fool, Lippo."

"I am not a fool. I love her, and *per Dio*, I must know. Tell me, Curtis,—is she a young girl to marry?" His face was pale with excitement as he spoke. "Listen: my father loves me, he will give me money, —we are not noble, but it is a good old name,—my father is proud,—tell me."

"I don't know what the devil you're driving at," Curtis answered, impatiently. "Of course, she's a young girl to marry if she'll marry you, which she won't."

The Italian's face lighted up. "Then, —do you see, Max? You were wrong."

Savrigny shrugged his shoulders. "I was *not* wrong, insane one. M. Curtis,— he means, the fool, that he would wish to *marry* her!"

Curtis paused a minute, and then, with an oath, flung his glass of wine full in the Frenchman's face.

Savrigny staggered back, blinded for the moment, and then, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, flew at the American with wonderful forgetfulness of his greatly inferior size.

Curtis caught his shoulders, and looking down at him, saying slowly, "I can't thrash you, you're too small," stepped out of the window and laid his adversary gently in the fountain.

Another minute and he was gone.

CHAPTER V

BETH was writing and Miss Frazer reading, when he came into their apartment half an hour later.

"What is it?" they cried together.

"The matter is that you've got to come to the Bristol this minute. I'll arrange it all, only you must come."

"To the Bristol,—what has happened?"

"I can't tell you, Beth ; you are in a terribly false position, and I've just thrashed that little hound Savrigny for insulting you. Put on your hats."

Sarah Frazer understood, and the blood ebbed slowly from her fresh face, leaving it gray and old.

Beth stared at them in surprise. "What? I don't understand."

"Come, dear," said Miss Frazer. "He is right. I have been an old fool. Have you a cab, Mr. Curtis?"

"Yes."

While they dressed, he gathered up a few little things he thought they might need and put them in his dress-suit case, which he had brought for the purpose. His head still swam, but his plans were made, and he carried them through.

"Thank God that she didn't understand," he said over and over again to himself. And it was true that the girl had not understood.

Whether it was a certain innocence that was part of her curiously complicated character, or whether her great vanity banished such a possibility from her mind, the fact remained the same.

In an hour's time they were installed at the Bristol, and Curtis, the key of their apartment in his pocket, had left them.

He went to his own hotel, rummaged in his luggage until he found the package of letters of introduction that he had until now neglected, and then went to bed.

The next morning at ten o'clock he

was at the door of the Palazzo Casavecchia, and at half-past ten, closeted with the old Princess, *née* Maria Allen, of Boston, a cousin of his mother's, and his sister's godmother.

When the old woman had scolded him for not coming to see her before, she let him tell his story, studying his face carefully as he spoke.

When he paused, she said, "Are you engaged to Miss Gurney?"

His face changed, but he answered, bravely, "No; but I wish I were."

"I see. I shall be ready in ten minutes. Mary Anne Russell must have gone mad since I saw her, to allow such goings-on; but I'll make it all right. It is very simple."

And Curtis, left alone, drew a long breath of relief. A burden shared is a burden halved.

At half-past twelve, Savrigny, his arm in a silk sling, rang at Miss Frazer's apartment. He was accompanied by another man. They had been to Curtis's

hotel, and learned that he had gone to the via Sanpiero. While they waited at the door, Neroni came up behind them, and joined them without speaking. After a short time the old woman to whom the house belonged opened the door, and they went in.

By the easel, on which stood poor Sally Frazer's picture, sat a beautiful, hook-nosed old woman in a dark velvet mantle trimmed with sable. No one else was in the room except a servant in livery, who knelt by a window packing a box full of books.

"Madame," began Savrigny, his manner changing instinctively as the old lady turned to him, "I beg your pardon."

"Monsieur," she returned, in perfect French, "it is I who derange. My friends are not here, as you see, and, as servants are never to be trusted, I have come myself to see that their belongings are properly cared for."

"Permit me to present myself,—Vicomte de Savrigny."

"And I am the Princess Casavecchia. Pray sit down, Monsieur."

Neroni and the other man slipped quietly away as Savrigny sat down.

"Have you known them long,—Miss Gurney and Miss Frazer, I mean? Charming, are they not? There is another book, Francesco. Beth is very dear to me, in spite of her obstinacy. What I have gone through, these two months! You, as a man of the world, can imagine my feelings, Monsieur,—my despair over the two geese. My prayers, my threats, all in vain: come they would. And I my dear Beth's grandmother's oldest friend." She smiled with satisfaction over this unveracious inspiration. "Elisabeth is my name, too. She is my godchild."

Savrigny bowed gravely.

"And the worst of it is, they are so shockingly innocent, these Americans. They do not realize how their very innocence may be their ruin. I told Sarah, only the other day, that people who do

not know the world, seeing the way they live, might have even doubts as to,—*h'm!* You understand me? *C'est désolant.*"

Savrigny was a dissolute little ne'er-do-well, but the blood in his veins was good, and he was quick-witted.

"Madame is quite right," he assented, warmly. "Such experiments are dangerous for ladies. For any other women on earth they would be quite out of the question; but Americans are known to be eccentric. And in this case, luckily, no one misunderstood."

The princess nodded tranquilly. "Oh, I know. But nevertheless they only owe it to luck,—that they met people who know the world."

"*Précisément.* But your gain, Madame, is our loss. Miss Frazer is very amiable and Miss Gurney a most charming young girl. Did I understand you to say that they are going to stay with you at present?"

"My godchild, yes. Miss Frazer had

a cablegram last night, calling her to America."

"Ah!" The Frenchman rose. "May I beg you to present my homages to the two ladies?" he began.

The old woman bowed. And as Savrigny bent over her hand, Curtis came in.

"Good-morning, Monsieur," the Frenchman said at once. "I beg your pardon, if I annoyed you last night."

Curtis took his hand, and answered, politely, "Oh, certainly. And I really think I was quite as annoying as you were."

Thus Beth and Miss Frazer were rescued from their dilemma.

The old princess scolded them both roundly when she met them at the Bristol, and then, struck by Beth's beauty, took one of her sudden fancies to the girl, and really asked her to stay at the Palazzo Casavecchia with her.

Poor Sarah was not invited. The old lady disliked timid people, and Miss

Frazer was so humiliated by her recent misfortunes that she could only wail.

Beth left her without regrets, and Miss Frazer went on to Venice with some friends she met in the Borghese gallery, whither she had gone to console herself in her affliction.

"My dear," said the princess that night at dinner, "how came your grandmother to trust you to that poor creature?"

"She used to be quite different, Princess; and she is the best soul that ever lived, really."

The old lady took a glass of wine, and then said, "If there is any one on earth more utterly annoying than the woman who means well, it is the woman who is the best soul on earth."

"It is something no one has ever said of me," Beth answered, laughing.

The princess looked at her. "I am quite sure of it, my dear. There is something wrong with your hair. We shall see what Adalgisa, my woman, can make of it."

CHAPTER VI

MRS. GORDON BLAIR walked slowly up the path, looking at the flowers that hung heavily on their stems, tired as she was by the great heat. The metallic blue of the sky, unrelieved by any softness of cloud, was of that blue that English people call "Italian." The trees were white with dust, the asphalt of the street behind her was softened by the heat and gave out a strong odour of tar. Mrs. Blair's face was red,—not her cheeks, but her face. Her hair, carefully curled over her brow, hung in loose wisps behind her ears and on the lace of her gown. She was one of those women who always have loose wisps of hair.

Mrs. Gurney's curtains were all drawn down, the blinds closed. The old house seemed asleep.

Mrs. Blair rang, and pressed close to the door, in the triangle of shadow, while she waited. At length footsteps inside broke the silence, and Sarah Harper, Mrs. Gurney's "second girl," opened the door.

Sarah Harper and Anna Curtis had been in the same Sunday-school class for years, calling each other by their first names. They had learned geography side by side at the academy, where Sarah's father was janitor, and had jumped rope together until their lips were white. Yet now, Sarah, bowing mutely to the unspoken laws of society, called her old playfellow "ma'am." So much for equality in the Land of the Free.

"Yes, ma'am; Mrs. Gurney is in."

Mrs. Blair sat down in the cool parlour and waited. The ormolu clock on the mantelpiece had stopped at twenty minutes past five many years ago, and at twenty minutes past five the hands rested now. She smiled. All her life she had

come at intervals to see Mrs. Gurney, and every time she had wondered why no one wound up the clock. Then she slipped down her glove, and looked again at the bracelet her husband had sent her for her birthday. It was a small, flexible chain set with a ruby surrounded by diamonds. He had sent it, being detained at Newport by some yachting business. Her eyes filled suddenly, and she felt her nose swell as she pressed back the tears. She didn't know which was worse,—red eyes or a swollen nose. Other people's repressed tears did not go to their noses, but her's did. And unfortunately her eyes had a stupid trick of filling with tears. She rose, and walked across the room to look at some photographs. There was one of Beth as a baby. She remembered coming to see the baby when it was only a few weeks old. She had always loved babies. Mrs. Gurney had brought the little thing down herself, and Anna had had the joy of taking it in her arms.

There was the chair, embroidered in wools, in which she had sat with Beth in her arms. Then the baby had suddenly opened its eyes and roared, and Anna had been afraid,—it grew so hideously scarlet.

"Anna! How nice of you!"

Mrs. Gurney had come in unheard.

The young woman kissed the elder, as she had always done, and then they both sat down.

"I had a long letter from Billy this morning, Mrs. Gurney, and I thought you might like to hear it. It is filled with news of Beth, of course," she finished, smiling.

Mrs. Gurney's sharp eyes took in everything at once,—the turned-down glove, the bracelet, the wet eyes; but she said nothing. She was one of those rare beings who can keep their pity to themselves.

Mrs. Blair opened the letter.

"At first it is just about us,—Gordon and me, and my last letter. Let me see.

Oh, yes. 'Cousin Maria is very nice, though rather "sot in her ways." She adores Beth, and Beth is the only person who dares to contradict her. The Villa is as big as the Deepwater post-office, pale pink in colour, and very plainly built. The inside of it seems dreadfully bare to me, but Beth says all Italian villas are.

"'There are a lot of swells staying here. The Duke of Aosta, the king's nephew, is here in the train of a pretty countess, whose husband seems delighted. Such things are quite different from what they are with us.

"'Cousin Maria's son is devoted to Beth, but she says his hands are moist. We play tennis. They all play badly, so I have to play badly, too, out of politeness. By the way, did Aunt Hannah tell you that Cousin Maria wrote her? She did, I know.

"'Are you and Blair going?'—let me see,—'I've been here two weeks, and go day after to-morrow. Beth is coming

home in October with the Hortons. I'm glad for one. America's good enough for me. Men are less adaptable than women, I suppose.

"'It tickles me to see Beth turn down some of these swells. She looks to the manner born. You never saw anything so pretty in your life as she is in a white ball-dress she has, trimmed with fluffy stuff like fine mosquito netting. And she has a tremendously imposing manner.'

"Then he says," went on Mrs. Blair, laughing, "'You will be sick of this drivel, old girl; but it's not the first time, is it?'"

"He is a dear boy, Billy. And it's a very amusing letter. Thanks, very much, Anna. Is that bracelet a birthday present?"

"Yes."

She took it off, and held it to the old lady.

"It is a beauty! From Gordon, of course?"

"Oh, yes. He is so good to me. He always gives me such beautiful presents. I must show you my pearls sometime."

Mrs. Gurney restricted her answer to further admiration of the ruby. There was certainly no use in reminding the young woman that the money spent by her generous husband was her own.

While they were talking, Peter Wayne came in.

"A letter from Beth!" he cried, waving the envelope in the air. "Ah, Anna, how do you do? How is your husband?"

"Very well, thank you, Mr. Wayne. He is not with me this time. He is yachting, you know."

"Yes, I know. And you don't care for it?"

Her plain face flushed. "I—I should like it very much, only I am one of those silly women who scream when they are frightened,—and I am easily frightened."

Wayne laughed, as he sat down and wiped his face on a Chinese silk handker-

chief. "I'm always seasick myself," he said.

She rose, and, in spite of Mrs. Gurney's urging her to stay longer, took her leave.

Then Wayne, looking after her through the shutters, said, quietly, "She's not happy, Mary Anne."

"Did you expect she would be, Peter? I didn't. Give me my work-bag, will you? No; how *could* such a girl as Anna Curtis be happy with such a husband as Gordon Blair?"

"She is a remarkably nice woman," he protested.

"Of course she is. But she has no more charm than a remarkably nice turnip, and Gordon Blair is not a man to love unadorned virtue. You know it as well as I. Now read me Beth's letter."

"In just a minute, Mary Anne. Tell me,—do they say he ill-treats her?"

"Of course he doesn't ill-treat her, you goose. He is, no doubt, extremely kind to her. He buys her beautiful presents,

—with her own money,—and is always beautifully polite to her. But her imagination, or her heart, whichever you like, being better developed than her beauty, she isn't satisfied. Now for Beth."

Wayne opened the letter and read it through. It was a merry, affectionate letter, full of those insignificant, all-important details that give life to written pages, and breathing a serene contentment in every word.

When he had finished reading, he leaned back, took off his steel-bowed spectacles, and said, "Well?"

She laughed, bending over her work. "'Well?' That means, 'Did you ever in your life read a more delightful letter?' Frankly, I don't know that I ever did. It's a rather rare accomplishment, and she has inherited it from her father."

"Mary Anne, do you remember George's letters from St. Paul's?"

"Yes, I do. His spelling was bad. Beth never misspelled a word in her life, I believe. That she has from me."

He rose impatiently. "It is absurd, the way you attribute all her qualities. They come from God alone, Mary Anne."

"Question of opinion. You think so, I don't. I've ordered you a dozen pairs of new socks. Frieda came to me in tears the other day,—and I don't wonder. You haven't a whole pair."

All his life he had submitted, outwardly, to her, and more than once inwardly. Now he sat down again, and listened silently to her scolding.

Then, when the shadows were lengthening, when the air was full of the smell of wet dust, when in front of almost every house stood a "hired man" in his shirt-sleeves, sprinkling the street and the lawn, Peter Wayne went home,—to that home that had been so little of a home for him for so many years,—leaving behind him that other house, nominally nothing to him, and yet in reality all his sorrow and all his joy.

CHAPTER VII

"MR. PHIL! I am going to kiss you!"

And she did, bending down to him with shining eyes.

Wayne laughed, Mrs. Gurney smiled, and Phil Pollock sighed, "Beth, Beth, you tell me too plainly how old I am!"

They were in the library, where a great fire burned, and where the windows were shrunk to half their size under loads of glistening snow. It was Christmas day, and Beth had been at home two months. Pollock was visiting his uncle, and had arrived the night before. He looked ill, and more crooked than ever beside the tall, graceful girl in her exquisitely simple gown, every line of which drew attention to some beauty of contour.

"She has grown a foot!" he exclaimed, as she led him to the fire and gave him a deep chair.

"Of course I have. And mentally I have developed two feet. I am twenty, Mr. Phil; I am 'out;' I am a lovely creature."

"That you are, though you say it, as shouldn't," he returned. "Beth, before the house stands a cutter,—livery,—painted red, full of furs. A quadruped is attached to it——"

She rose hastily. "Of course I will. How glorious!"

In ten minutes they were jingling merrily along over a very good country road, between high white banks, under a suggestively woolly gray sky.

"It is too delightful!" the girl said, pinching her cheeks behind her muff, because even now her nose would get redder than it should, in comparison. "And I am so glad to see you again. You are the dearest Santa Claus in the world."

"Only I've nothing but pain in my hump," he answered, sharply.

She was silent, feeling that words were

dangerous. If he should grow bitter, her drive would be spoiled.

They passed other sleighs, almost every one occupied by a man and a woman.

"This is so deliciously American," she began at length, bowing to Sally McLean, with her latest adorer, a youth of seventeen. "In Europe it would be entirely out of the question." She had forgotten her Bohemian experiences, and spoke entirely *à la grande dame.* "And it is so funny to come back here, and find the same people still flirting, only with another person all around."

"Do you, for example, always flirt with the same person?" he asked, dryly.

"I? Oh, I don't flirt much. It is rather vulgar, don't you think?"

"Depends entirely on who does it. Now, Beth,—this is a good time,—confess. You haven't forgotten our compact, have you?"

"Oh, no," she answered, slowly; "only——"

"Only you have nothing to confess?"

Then she burst out laughing. "Only —I don't know where to begin."

He laughed too. "Let me help you, then, as the priests do. You must begin far back,—that summer I was here. When I left, you were rather miserable about that beautiful person,—I forget his name."

"Gordon Blair. Oh, yes. *Very* unhappy. It is so delicious to be unhappy. By the way, I must call you Phil. May I? 'Mr.' Phil is so absurd."

"Phil, by all means. Well, who obliterated Blair?"

"Oswald Courtney-Yorke, an Englishman who came on for his wedding. He was ugly, but very nice, and then English, you know. The first one we ever had in Deepwater. Sally McLean—— By the way, did you know that François, the Pocahontas steward, used to call her 'The lady with the golden teeth'? Well, she went in for him tooth-and-nail, so to speak; but I got him."

"Did he propose to you?"

She laughed again. "No. That's just the joke. Every one thought he did; but he didn't. I was really rather blue for a time, and then grandmother decided to let me go to Europe with Miss Sally, and that cured me."

"Next?"

"Next,—oh, a lot of little boobies, one after another, you know. A German, on the ship,—he had a lovely voice,—then an Italian officer, in Florence,—and so on. No one of any importance until we reached Rome."

"And all this time you kept up your reputation for being indifferent?"

"Of course I did. It is odd, that passion with me. I always curl up, and don't let any ragged edges hang out,—you know what I mean. And then I *am* so egotistic! Here I am enjoying talking about myself! it's awful."

"You may enjoy it. You are interesting," he answered, turning in at the club gates.

Then, as they flew over the well-beaten-down snow, "And in Rome?"

"Well, in Rome,—in Rome, you see, —remember, all this is under the seal of confession."

"Of course. In Rome?"

"We, Sally Frazer and I, did a very silly thing. It was rather fun, but awfully silly. We went and lived for three months among the art students and such people of the city. We had an apartment, and everything was thoroughly Bohemian."

"Dirty? The genuine article is, rather."

"Yes, it is. Some of them were rather frowsy. But I didn't mind particularly. I never do mind things much. That is, I adapt myself at once. It was really fun, though we grew rather vulgar. Then Billy Curtis came, and upset everything. There was some sort of a row, —but I don't quite know what. He was very nice, Billy."

"But before that, who was the man?"

"A Frenchman. A count. Titles *are* rather enchanting, and he had a horrible charm for me. He didn't care a bit for *me*, though."

"And hence the charm."

"Perhaps," she laughed, as they drew up in front of the club-house.

They ordered coffee, and talked to two or three people who were there while drinking it. François had left, and an Englishman occupied his place. Beth was sorry, as she told Pollock when they were once more in the cutter. "He admired me,—François,—and he looked like a man who had seen things."

On the way home she told him the story of the rescue by the princess, and her subsequent gayeties.

"She must have been delightful," he observed.

"She was. And very nice to me. I was only a caprice, of course,—one of many,—but it was an experience, and interesting in every way."

"How do you know you were a caprice?" he asked, turning and looking at her.

"Because I do. One always knows, if one wants to. The longer I live, the more I wonder at the way people shut up their eyes and their ears, and tell themselves fairy-tales."

"You are young to have arrived at that discovery."

"Yes, I am young. But oh, Phil, things do so interest me! And curiosity is a progressive quality. I learn so many things every day, and it is such fun!"

Her cheeks were red, her eyes wide open. He watched her in silence.

"Some day, when you are very old, Beth, you must write your 'Impressions.'"

"I shouldn't mind,—only they would have to come out anonymously,—or post-mortem."

"Another thing: what about your conscience? Honour bright."

"Honour bright, Phil, I have none,—though I pretend to. I really believe I could do anything, short of killing my grandmother, without one pang. I can *lie!*" She spread out her hands, broadened in her fur-lined gloves, in a little gesture new to him. "I can lie in a way I *know* must be rare. It is not a mere talent; it is a genius. And then when I pose, I do it so well that I believe in myself for the time. They say Duse does that, and that Bernhardt doesn't. I know I do, and it *must* be convincing, don't you think?"

Pollock laughed aloud. "My dear girl, you are splendid!" he said. "Of course it's convincing. But don't you often run against other people in your mad career,—hurt feelings, and so on?"

She paused a minute, and then said, reflectively, "No, honestly, I don't think I do. I loathe hurting people, and I loathe scenes, you know. Besides, I'm too self-engrossed to meddle with other people's affairs."

They drew up at the house, and she broke off: "There's dear old Uncle Peter coming to meet us. I do love him, Phil. You don't know!"

Her eyes were wet.

CHAPTER VIII

"MISS GURNEY, this is mine."

She turned slowly. She had learned to move slowly in the last year, and it was becoming. "Ah, Mr. Sears, is it really ours?" Shifting her bouquet, she took his arm, and they joined the dancers.

She had been to three dances already in the week she had been in Boston as Kitty Wendell's guest, and her terror of not being a success—a very real terror, though utterly unsuspected by any one—had melted away in the sun of favour that had beamed on her from the first.

Young Sears, a Harvard man, just graduated, was in love with her. He was a youth of his time, cool, clear-headed, with a full determination not to "make a fool of himself." That she felt, and rather resented. But he danced

well, and the music was "The Swallows under the Eaves," her white satin gown was a Paquin, and the girl, who danced with a keen delight few people know, was perfectly happy.

With her bizarre love of the methodical, she had arranged for her use in the world three maxims: "Never to be reduced to a one-stringed bow; never, under any circumstances, to show pique; and to admire other women."

"Who is the lovely little brown girl talking to Mr. Eccles?" she asked presently, as they stopped dancing.

Monty Eccles was an old-young man, a "rusher,"—*Anglicé*, offerer of vivid, meaningless attentions to pretty women.

"That's a Miss Ingersoll, of Baltimore, —a sister of Mrs. Tony Welbeck," returned Sears, opening her fan and bending his satiny, mouse-colored head over it.

"She is wonderfully pretty!"

Beth herself did not realize that there lay in her voice and manner an almost

ludicrous resemblance to the old Princess Casavecchia.

"Oh, yes; she's pretty enough. Too dark for me."

"And the big man with the mutton-chops?"

"Count Schwarzenburg, the German ambassador. He's very devoted to Mrs. Ladislaw. Miss Gurney, why didn't you carry my flowers?"

"I carried your flowers last night."

"That's no reason. Tell me,—who sent you these?"

She laughed. "I bought them myself."

It was true. Her bouquet of red roses had cost her over ten dollars. But of course he did not believe her.

"Are you going to my sister's dinner to-morrow?" he went on.

"I am, indeed."

"May I send you some violets?"

"Yes. Thanks, very much, Mr. Sears."

Just then a beautiful woman, in a gown more conspicuous for quality than for

quantity, passed with an elderly man. Beth asked who she was, and learned that she was Mrs. Morris Devereux.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, a little shiver of pity coming over her. It was the woman whom poor, crooked Phil Pollock loved.

"She is very beautiful," she added.

"One of the finest."

As the boy answered, Monty Eccles, gleaming as to face and bald head, out of breath and puffing a little, came up and claimed his waltz.

Beth, like many tall women, danced very well, and did not in the least mind dancing with small men, and Monty Eccles, in spite of his decided rotundity, waltzed beautifully.

Her next partner was Herbert Waterman, a mighty hunter, but a terrifying dancer.

"I think our young friend Monty is in love with you, Miss Gurney," he said, as, feigning fatigue, she stopped, and took his arm.

She laughed. "But am I his *first* love? *Voilà la question!*"

As she spoke she looked up, and there, across the room from her, leaning against the door, she saw Gordon Blair.

She drew a long breath that made her satin corsage creak, and her hand quivered a minute on Waterman's arm. Then she said, "It is so warm; can we not sit down?"

Her voice thrilled herself in its new sweetness as she spoke. A few minutes later she saw Blair talking to Mrs. Devereux.

"Stunning couple, aren't they?" Sears asked.

"Yes. He used to be perfectly beautiful."

"Do you know Blair?"

Beth laughed. "Oh, yes. He was born in 'our village.' But I daresay he's forgotten me."

For two dances Blair did not move, then he rose, and offering his arm to the beautiful, diamond-crowned woman, they danced.

At length, as Beth sat talking to someone, Blair came up to her. "How do you do, Miss Gurney; have you forgotten me?"

She started, and then cried frankly, holding out her hand, "Of course I haven't, Mr. Blair. I'm awfully glad to see you. Is Miss Anna here, too?"

"No. 'Miss Anna' is in New York. May I sit down?"

The other man bowed himself away, and Blair took his chair. "Have you been here long?"

He spoke with a drawl that she felt to be affected, but she liked it. She noticed that his curly hair was sprinkled with gray.

"I've been here a week, Mr. ——, *absurd!* I was going to call you 'Mr. Gordon.' Such babyish habits do cling to one. Isn't it a heavenly ball?"

A few minutes before she had been talking in the most *blasé* way to young Sears, and, realizing herself the inevitable swing of her mental pendulum, she bit her lip to suppress a smile.

"Very heavenly," Blair answered, his dark eyes laughing. "And you girls, of course, are the angels."

"What could be more *banal?*" she thought with a touch of impatience, while she answered, "I won't be laughed at. It *is* a perfect ball, and Boston men dance so beautifully."

"Do they?" he returned, smiling the New York smile. "May I have a turn?"

She sighed when they stopped dancing. "Please ask me for another dance later, will you? It is very 'cheeky' of me, asking you, but we're old friends."

His eyes half closed as he laughed again. "Of course we're old friends, and of course I'll be charmed if you'll honour me. Here comes that rampaging Hazard boy."

"I love rampaging the two-step with him. Good-bye."

After supper she expected him again, but he did not come. Indeed, he stayed in the supper-room over an hour with Mrs. Devereux.

Beth danced every dance, her cheeks a deep pink with excitement and anger.

It grew late; people began to leave. The thin women began to look haggard, the fat ones blowsy. Collars were limp, and bouquets were rags. Then at last he came, laughing back at Mrs. Devereux over his shoulder.

Beth clutched her fan tight. "Now don't you be a fool, and let him see that you're angry, Beth Gurney," she told herself.

"Our dance, is it not?"

She smiled up at him. "Ours? No, —it is Mr. Kane's; isn't it, Mr. Kane?"

Mr. Kane, who was a bore of celebrity, answered with delight, "Certainly it is, Miss Gurney."

"I am afraid I've bungled, Mr. Blair,— you will forgive me. Mr. Kane is telling me his experiences in the blizzard."

Blair bowed and turned away.

"So you were four hours in the train?" he heard her say with keen interest. "Do tell me the rest."

CHAPTER IX

"I LOVE him. I have always loved him. That is very simple. The next question is, 'Does he love me?' If that were as simple, the interest would be greatly less. However, I shall soon know.

"And my game is evidently that of annoying him. I will treat him as though he were quite antediluvian, and be *l'ingénue* in every way. He is vain, he is not very clever, and he is entirely unused to such behaviour on the part of young women. It will irritate him. *Vogue la galère.* To-night I will add the result of my first day's campaign. Now I must go down to luncheon."

She locked the book, now nearly full of impressions and discussions with herself, hung the key on the chain around her neck, and went down-stairs.

Mrs. Wendell was playing with her little boy in the library. "Oh, you darling!" cried Beth, kneeling by the child and kissing him. "Give your Aunt Bet a kiss." Little Mat received her caresses gravely. He was rather a heavy child of a year old, with eyes curiously like Blair's.

"He will be a beauty, Kitty," the girl said, as she rose and shook down her skirts. "I think Mr. Gordon used to be quite the handsomest being I ever beheld."

"Used to be, Beth!"

"Oh, of course—he is still awfully good-looking," she returned, with a shade of embarrassment; "but, of course,—he is older now,—for his age, though, he is handsomer than any one I've ever seen."

Kitty Wendell's sisterly pride was hurt for a minute, then she laughed. "Oh, you goose," she cried. "What a baby you are! He is only thirty-two."

Beth could hardly repress a cry of jubilation as the door opened at this instant and Blair came in.

"What is it?" he asked, lazily, bowing to Beth, and shoving the baby gently out of his way with one foot, that he might stand before the fire. "Who is only thirty-two?"

"You," answered his sister. "Never mind, Beth, I shan't tell." She laughed teasingly.

"Tell if you like,—we were talking about you, Mr. Gordon; didn't your ears burn? I was confessing the secrets of my young heart."

"Delightful! And I have a place there?"

"Ingratitude of men," she cried, solemnly. "Here am I, who wasted the young love of my heart on you, burning silent incense for years at your shrine,—and you didn't even know it."

"You ridiculous monkey!" laughed Kitty. "Tell us about it."

"Oh, we were all desperately in love with Mr. Gordon,—Bella Lacy and Maud, and Clara Hill,—all of 'us girls,' up to at least fifteen."

"May I ask who was my successor in your interesting affections?"

"Mr. Hamilton Harper."

Blair groaned. "Good Heavens! this is awful! And do you still adore him?"

"Oh, no. That ended when I went to Florida. What geese girls are! I feel myself now, at twenty, very aged and very wise, but I suppose, even now, you older people think me a silly baby."

"I never thought you silly," he answered, carelessly, as the man announced luncheon.

Note added to Beth's almost word-for-word memorandum of the conversation written that night: "He was piqued, though he didn't show it."

She did not see Blair again until the following evening at a dance, when he came in very late.

Young Sears was troubling her. She saw in his eyes that which she hated,—emotion, and the promise of a scene.

Twice she danced with the boy, refusing to sit out with him. Then at last he

caught her, and began to pour out his tale.

Her heart beat sickeningly in her throat; she hated him; she wanted to laugh at him; he was absurd. Then suddenly Blair came towards them, and with an imploring face she called him. "Here I am, Mr Blair,—you are looking for me, are you not?"

He hesitated a second, and then said, "Yes. This is ours, Miss Gurney."

She rose hastily, excused herself to Sears, and took Blair's arm. "Do you mind?" she asked, with a little shiver of relief. "I couldn't help it——"

"Delighted, I am sure, but——"

"But you think me very brazen. I know I was, Mr. Gordon, but I was in despair."

"I wish you wouldn't call me 'Mr. Gordon;' it is ridiculous, Beth. I am not quite ancient enough for that," he exclaimed, irritably, as they began to dance.

She flushed with satisfaction. "I beg your pardon. I always used to call you that, you know."

"Sears was making love to you, wasn't he?" he went on.

"*Ugh!* I couldn't get away from him. It was ghastly."

"Glad I happened along. Do you really hate it so?"

They had stopped waltzing and sat down. "Of course I do. Probably I shan't some day, when my Prince Charming comes, but until then——"

"So you intend to marry?"

"Of course I do. As Napoleon said: 'If men never grew old, marriage would be a mistake, but as they *do*,'—it's the same with women. What could be sadder than being old and alone? Shouldn't you hate it?"

He frowned suddenly, and then answered, "Of course, the married state is a state of blessedness. If you hate being made love to, why do you flirt?"

"I? Flirt? I never flirted in my life!" Blair laughed aloud.

"I *don't* flirt."

"Then what do you call flirting?"

She paused, looking closely at her fan. "Well,—you flirted with that girl at Kitty's wedding. I was only a child, but I remember."

"If you were only a child, how did you know?"

"Now you are teasing me. Ah, here comes that Mr. *Chose,* who dances so well. Thanks awfully for rescuing me."

The next afternoon, towards dark, as she came home from the rehearsal of a comedy in which she was to act, she met Blair, and they walked up the street together. It was snowing, and the girl's sealskin jacket was covered with flakes. Under her broad, black hat her face was rosily pale. She was enjoying the rare pleasure of looking up at the man to whom she talked.

"Are you going to the dance to-night?" she asked, as they neared the house.

"No. I am too old for a *débutantes'* ball."

"It doesn't make any difference how

old you are, as long as you dance well. None of the girls care."

"Very kind of the girls," he answered, drily.

Neither of them spoke again until they stood before the door, and he had rung.

Then she said hastily, laying her slim hand on his arm, "I wonder if you'd come if I asked you?"

He bent over in the gathering darkness to look into her eyes. "You might try."

"I *do* ask you. Please?"

"Then I will come."

The door opened just then, and Beth ran up-stairs without looking around.

During dinner she awaited eagerly Blair's announcement of his intention. "If he mentions me," she thought, "I may as well give it up, if he doesn't——"

Towards the end of the meal Blair drawled to Mrs. Wendell, "Save me a waltz, Kitty. I have decided to renew my youth by dancing at the Talbot's." And Beth was content.

After dinner Wendell went to the theatre, Kitty for her usual sleep before dressing, and Blair disappeared. Beth drew a chair to the library fire and sat down. The lamps were low; the red fire-light shot unsteady arrows of brilliance across the gloom; the grandfather's clock in the corner ticked slumberously.

When the girl awoke, it was with a feeling of gratitude to the gods that she had really slept, and that Blair had come in. He sat opposite her, smoking a cigarette.

"I was almost asleep," she said, laughing.

"Quite, I should say. Do you remember one time I found you asleep at home,—in Deepwater?"

"Oh, yes. Grandmamma was ill."

"I—kissed you while you slept."

She burst out laughing. "You didn't! How absurd."

"You are not annoyed?"

"Annoyed? No, of course not. Why should I be? I was only a baby."

He rose impatiently, and threw his cigarette into the fire. "You were sixteen. Just hear the wind! I don't think I'll go out to-night, it's beastly."

"But you promised!" In the faint light her face was oddly childlike.

"Oh, yes,—but you'll give me back my word. We old people like our quiet in the evenings." Then with a short laugh, he added, "Besides,—you don't really care whether I go or not."

She rose and came to him. She was very serious now, and the childishness had left her face. "But,—I do care. I want you."

"Is that true, or are you laughing at me?"

"It is true. Will you come?"

After a pause, he answered, slowly, looking at her steadily, "Yes, I will come."

Then, without speaking, she left the room.

An hour later a magnificent bunch of violets was brought to her. There was no card.

CHAPTER X

EXTRACT from the locked book: "*Ca marche.* It is progressing. Yesterday he had a letter that annoyed him. After luncheon I met him in the hall. 'Mr. Blair,' I said, gently, 'something troubles you.'

"He turned his beautiful, sad eyes on me and answered, 'Yes, Beth,—something often does trouble me.'

"'Of course I know you think me too young to understand anything, and I don't ask you *what* it is. Only, may I say how sorry I am?'

"He took my hand and looked at me seriously. I wonder that he didn't notice how icy cold my hand was.

"'Thank you, child,' he answered. That was all. But according to my way of thinking, every new phase one can present to a man is a new weapon against him.

"The last night at the opera I hardly looked at him. George Murray was there, and very devoted.

"He is a very good 'string,' being handsome and rather old. Kitty thinks he's in love with me, and has probably told Gordon so, for he, Gordon, was distinctly irritated, and leaving us early, went and sat with the Kings, with whom Mrs. Devereux was.

"I saw him watching me a good deal, but of course I didn't look at him. He is the most perfectly beautiful human being I ever saw, in spite of being a *wee* bit tenor-ish. To-night, after the theatricals, there is to be a dance. I suppose my turn for retribution is come. Turn about is fair play, and things always *do* take a turn. I'm going to wear pink, for when I'm angry I always get so frightfully pale.

4 A.M.

"I was right. Oh, my God, my God! I love him! I could die happy if I only knew that he loves me. But he does not.

He has only flirted with me. And I am a vain, ignorant, little *ass*. *Why should* he look at me?

"To-morrow, of course, I'll be better, and half of my pain comes from over-fatigue, but just now I wish I could die; I didn't know I could be so unhappy. The comedy was good, and I acted much better than the others. Then he came up and congratulated me, with lots of other people, all of whom I should have liked to kill, and then he went away, and talked and danced all the evening with a strange girl, a Miss Edison,—a Southerner. She is awfully pretty, much prettier than I am.

"Oh, I am *so* unhappy. I love him so. Why must I love him? Why was I ever born? why——why anything and everything?"

She cried herself to sleep, fully convinced that Blair had only been amusing himself with her. Then she awoke with the sun streaming in at her window, and, utterly without new influences, her heart rose.

"He does care," she told herself, laughing at herself in the glass. "He does."

Loving the man, helplessly attracted to him by the poor fact of his beauty, even while her keen mind realized distinctly his decided mental mediocrity, that which she wanted, that for which she was struggling, was a declaration of love from him.

If he would tell her in so many words that he loved her, she would, she thought, be contented.

She was rather fond of Anna Blair in a condescending way, and would have shrunk from giving her pain. And with all her precociousness, the girl was in some ways astoundingly childlike, and her imagination stopped short at the scene in which he should declare his love to her, and she confess hers to him.

She had no fantastic idea of not marrying for his sake. She had even her own dreams of a noble being with a poetic soul and much money, who should one day be her husband.

Yet Gordon Blair must love her to complete her life. An unhappy love—a sad souvenir—the memory of his beautiful face distorted by strong feeling—these things she wanted, and on them her strong will was bent.

She had all her life had a mania for "rounding things off." Even needlework, which she detested, she always finished, for the satisfaction of telling herself, "Now, *that's* done."

And the scene with Blair was to be the rounding off of that which she destined to her future life as her first love.

He was, she knew, a man of honour. She quite realized the difficulties before her. But she had made up her mind, and now, this snowy morning, shut her teeth hard, and determined to "forge ahead."

When she was dressed she went through a silly little formula of her own, that was a relic of her childhood. Drawing a circle with her finger on the carpet, she muttered mysteriously: "Abra

cadabra cadabra,—let me have my wish, witches of the Mountains of the Moon."

Then laughing at herself, she went down-stairs. At her plate lay a letter, in a hand she had never seen. She slipped it into her pocket unopened. "It is the answer to my charm," she thought, happily.

When luncheon was over she went to her room and read her letter, her face paling and reddening in turns.

Then she came down to Mrs. Wendell, and excused herself from going to a reception that afternoon. "I am tired, and think I'd better rest,—on account of the ball to-night, you know."

Four o'clock came, and Beth, who had really slept, went down to the library and rang for tea. "Is Mr. Wendell not at home?" she asked the butler.

"No, miss."

"Mr. Blair?"

"Yes, miss. Mr. Blair has just come in."

"Tell Mr. Blair that I am making tea,

Hawkes, and ask him if he will not come down," she said.

A few minutes later Blair came in.

"Do you mind?" she asked. "I was alone."

"So you asked me to come down. You are flattering, as usual." He sat down and smiled lazily at her.

"Ah, but perhaps I am *really* flattering this time, Mr. Blair. One reason I sent to you was—— I want to ask your advice about something. May I?"

"Of course. What is it?"

She poured out the tea, and then answered quickly, in a very low voice, "I had a letter this morning,—from a—a man I knew in Rome. Duke Roccabianca. He is here,—and is coming to see me this afternoon,—between five and six."

Blair stirred his tea. "And——?"

"He is going to ask me to marry him. And I—I am very young, I have no father, —I want you to advise me. Will you?"

"Of course," he returned, laughing shortly. "Tell me about him."

"Well, he is—quite old,—thirty-five; he is rich, I believe, and I like him very much."

The clock ticked slowly in the silence. Then Blair asked, "Do you love him?"

"I—don't know. He is very nice and amusing."

He leaned forward and took her hand. "Beth, you mustn't marry him."

"Why?"

"Because—you don't realize what it means, a marriage without love. Dear, it is a hell on earth,—a hell on earth." Rising, he walked to the fire and stood with his back to her.

She was brilliantly pale and breathing hard.

"I must tell you," she said, hoarsely, "that I don't think I'll ever *love* any one. I seem to be very cold by nature."

Then he burst out laughing and came back.

"You? You cold? My dear child! No. You must wait. Tell him you cannot marry him. You *must not* marry him."

He stood looking into her eyes for ten seconds, and then said slowly, "Promise me, dear."

And very softly, with passionate eyes, she answered, "I promise."

CHAPTER XI

THAT night, at a dance, she said to him, carelessly, "Oh, by the way, —I have broken my promise."

"Have you?"

"Yes. I found that——"

"May I wish you joy?"

"Not just yet. He is going to travel about for a few months, and then, in the spring, it is to be announced."

"Ah! After all, there's no waltz like the dear old Blue Danube, is there?"

When the waltz was over he left her, and did not speak to her again all the evening.

The next day she was to go home, and now, as the minutes passed, she literally cursed herself for her idiocy in spoiling everything.

"I love him, and he loves me, and I am such a fool I have ruined it all," she cried to herself, fiercely.

"He is not such a fool as I thought, and I am a vain goose. I'm not clever, after all, and I am such a baby! He has amused himself, and now—*è finito!* And yet his eyes. His dear, dear eyes!"

Once she met his direct gaze across the room, and the pain in it delighted her, while it hurt her bitterly.

She danced all night, and was very gay, while her heart, her *physical* heart, ached.

When they reached the house, Blair helped the two women out of the carriage, and together they went up the snowy steps.

It was the last time. Her eyes filled with tears. They went in and sat down to the usual early morning supper of bouillon or milk.

"Oh, I am *so* tired!" yawned Kitty.

Wendell looked at his watch. "Quarter to four. Absurd life it is."

Beth drank a glass of milk in silence, and then rose. As she did so, Mrs. Wendell turned and said something to

her husband, and Blair's black eyes met the girl's brown ones. At last he had lost his self-control, and his eyes told all that he had not said. The girl trembled violently as she stared back at him. The tale was told. Then quietly saying good-night she went up-stairs. The next morning she packed.

Blair did not appear at luncheon. She was in despair. Her face grew drawn and pale. Her train was to leave at five.

At three she was going up-stairs to finish her arrangements, when Blair came out of his room.

"I have been waiting for you," he said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He took her hands in his. "Beth,—there's no use in our telling each other—anything,—we both know."

"We both know," she repeated, with stiff lips.

"And you won't marry that Italian? Some day you will marry some one,—I

hope,—but not him. You don't love him."

"No. I don't love him."

"Promise me you won't marry him?"

"I promise." Her eyes had never turned from his.

Then he released her hands. "Good-bye,—dear."

"Good-bye."

She had gone, and he was alone.

When she reached home she declared herself to be "tired out," and stayed in bed for three days. She lay for hours without moving, the blinds closed, in the half-darkness. Noise hurt her, she said, and she could not talk.

During the three days she was supremely unhappy. For the first time she realized the strength of her own love, and the "might have beens." A line from a song of Brahms haunted her, and she repeated it over and over to herself, enjoying the appropriateness, even in her misery:

"Ringsum ist öder Strand."

"Oder Strand!" that was to be her life. She was really, what only a non-religious nature can be, hopeless. Roccabianca, whom, in spite of her lie to Blair, she had refused, had given her his address, and had added that a word would bring him at any time.

It is significant of the realness of her despair, that she never for a second contemplated sending for him. Revenge had no charm for her.

Mrs. Gurney, who naturally did not believe in the "tired" theory, was at a loss. Beth had always been remarkably strong, in spite of her paleness. She had not been ill since she had the measles at ten.

Wayne, when consulted, suggested malaria. When Beth came down-stairs, he continued to talk of malaria until she hated him.

Then, thinking to divert her, he insisted on her telling them about her visit,—whom she met, where they had gone, and so on. And tortured as she was, she told them. She mentioned Blair with absolute

indifference, mimicked his languid manner, repeated that he had "gone off," and from him passed on to George Murray.

Spring came and early summer. Beth rode a good deal and took long walks. She played tennis, drank tea, in fact, made herself in no way noticeable by changed habits. Little by little she grew better. After all, she had the satisfaction of knowing that Blair had suffered as much as she.

With a most rare philosophy, she told herself that she was young, and that the world held much good for her. "I shall get over it," she said; "people always do."

At last she was almost quite cured,—the thought of Blair's eyes alone haunting her. She loved him, but it was a poetic pain, and her vanity had in no way suffered.

She spent hours imagining to herself his sad life, his sufferings. She looked at the moon, and told herself that he

too was looking at it, and thinking of her.

She at last grew to love her romantic unhappiness, and to prize it at its true value.

Then one day she chanced to find in an illustrated paper a series of kodak pictures taken at Newport.

One of them represented Blair's coach. Beth flew down-stairs, found her grandmother's little old magnifying-glass, and, coming back to her room, examined the picture.

It was a remarkably good one, and she recognized not only Blair, but another man and—Miss Edison, the "Southern girl." And Blair was laughing.

So! That was how he was suffering.

She crunched the picture into a ball and threw it down. Then she hastily dressed and went out.

She met Bella Lacy on her way "down street," and joined her.

"Hot, isn't it?" said Bella.

"I don't know. I'm never warm."

Bella, who was fat, looked admiringly at her. "You're always lovely and pale, Beth," she remarked, enviously; "and I do get so fiery red."

As they walked, a carriage passed, and Mrs. Gordon Blair bowed from it.

"Don't you think she's here an awful lot, Beth? They say he isn't very nice to her."

"Rubbish! Do you want some soda water?"

Bella did. "Chawc'late."

Beth took a seltzer lemonade.

As they reached the telegraph office, Anna Blair came down the steps, putting on her gloves.

"Oh, Beth!" she said, "Gordon is coming. I've just telegraphed back—" Her face was redder than usual, her eyes glassy with rushed tears.

"How very nice," Beth answered. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

Then she passed up the steps, and sent a telegram.

CHAPTER XII

THE rooms were full when at length Mrs. Gurney and Beth arrived.

It was a cool night, and "every one in town" was there. Mrs. McLean, the lady with the golden teeth, was there, somewhat subdued by the unusual presence of her husband, a navy officer, who had been for three years in the Chinese seas; Clara Hill, who had been Mrs. Bryan Smith for nearly four months, sat explaining to some one that there were "Smiths and *Smiths*."

Pretty women with diamonds, pretty women in cheap silk gowns, pretty women of all kinds.

Ugly, or rather plain, women of all kinds.

The men, on the whole, were physically distinctly inferior to the women.

An orchestra from Rochester was playing behind a screen of palms, and several

pairs of younger people were dancing. They danced uncommonly well.

"Mary Ann Gurney is coming," old Mrs. Carey, the hostess's mother, said to her neighbour, Judge Wilson, who was sleepy, and meditating flight immediately after supper.

"I haven't known her to go anywhere for twenty years."

"Nor I." Mrs. Carey, a clever old woman without any early education and with much later, winked at him solemnly. "Some game of Beth's, you may be sure, William."

Just then Mrs. Gurney came in, impressive and grim in her well-made gray silk, leaning on Peter Wayne's arm. Behind them came Beth and a strange man.

Beth was smiling as they entered. She looked very beautiful in white satin, and carried a bunch of pale green orchids.

Mrs. Gurney shook hands with Mrs. West, and then introduced the stranger.

"I want to present Duke Roccabianca to you, Susan," and Mrs. West, who had

never been farther than New York in her life, concealed her surprise well.

"I am delighted," she murmured.

Roccabianca bowed gravely.

Then they passed on. Beth was triumphantly happy. The effort had been made, and she felt the envy of the others in the air.

Besides, ever since he had come that morning, in prompt response to her telegram, she had felt her spirits rise steadily. It was something to be a duchess. And then Roccabianca was rich, and he certainly loved her, or he would never have followed her to America and asked her to marry him,—her, Beth Gurney, without a penny! And he was not bad-looking in his way. His eyes were rather fine, and he had thick, moss-like, black hair growing low down on his brow; he was not quite so tall as she, but carried himself well, and his hands and feet were beautiful.

She remembered that she had noticed at a Hunt Ball that Gordon Blair's legs were very thin,

Her head well up, real happiness glowing in her eyes, she introduced her *fiancé* to some of her old friends.

"When is it to be, Beth?" asked Mrs. McLean, curiously, wriggling her sharp shoulders back into her gown.

Beth laughed. "I'm not quite sure, Miss Sally,—but I fear very soon. Duke Roccabianca has an engagement with the king for the September hunting in Calabria."

Mrs. Carey coaxed the girl into a corner and made her sit down, while Roccabianca was talking to some one.

"Now, Beth, tell me."

"What shall I tell you?"

"Was it all arranged in Rome? I won't tell."

"No. It wasn't,—exactly,—I mean, well, I've only been engaged since I was in Boston."

"And you never told! What is his name, dear; I didn't catch it?"

"Vittorio Federigo Paolo Silverio di Roccabianca di San Giuliano d'Ansaldi-

Bracca." She laughed as she finished. "Tremendous, isn't it?"

"And where will you live?" persisted the curious old woman.

"In Rome in the winter. Then in the summer,—there are several country houses, I believe,—I don't know exactly where."

Mrs. Carey was delighted. Like all the old people in the town, she was fond of the girl, who had always been courteous and gentle, and shown more consideration for her elders than is usual among the young people of small American towns.

The younger members of Deepwater society, Beth's own contemporaries, were less pleased. For various reasons, she was not a great favourite with the girls, and the young men were rather afraid of her.

The music went on ; the windows were open, and it was cool and pleasant. Roccabianca made himself agreeable, dancing a great deal, and with the utter impartiality of the man in love.

Beth sat demurely by her grandmother and looked on. The Blairs, she knew, would be late.

A few minutes before eleven, she rose, and, taking Roccabianca's arm, suggested to him that they should dance together again. She had heard a carriage stop below.

They danced once around the room, then again, and as they reached the door she stopped.

"I am tired, Vittorio," she said, distinctly.

Blair and his wife stood on the threshold. Beth passed them without looking at them, and sat down again, Roccabianca leaning over her and talking.

Her exultance knew no bounds. She nearly loved the man for his timely coming to her rescue, for his graceful, distinguished manner, for his title. And she delighted in the thought of his money.

"Beth, I am very happy," he murmured, proud of his disinterestedness in marrying for love.

She looked up at him with eyes full of love. "So am I, Caro."

And she was. "After all," she had told herself while dressing, "Vittorio is much the cleverer man, and he *can* marry me!"

And now, Blair's presence in Deepwater, so rare that this time it seemed to the girl almost providential, completed her satisfaction.

Presently she rose, and taking Roccabianca's arm again, led him to where Anna Blair sat with some other non-dancing women, and introduced him to her.

Mrs. Blair was very cordial indeed. "Isn't it sudden, Beth?" she asked.

"You must ask the duke that, Miss Anna."

Roccabianca asked Mrs. Blair to dance, but she refused, and Beth, sitting down, sent him to dance with Bella Lacy. She could afford to be good-natured, and, as usual, had a real delight in giving some one else a pleasure.

Presently Blair came up, shook hands with her, and asked her for the next waltz but one.

"Gordon, Beth is engaged," his wife cried. "Isn't it wonderful to think how time flies! I was ten years old when she was born."

"May I offer you my good wishes?" he said. "I hope you will be very happy."

"Thanks," she answered. "I think I shall. He is very good."

When their waltz came, she was still sitting by his wife.

"It is Duke Roccabianca, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes. Oh, Mr. Blair,—you were so nice to me in Boston,—I want to tell you now, only I don't quite know how to——"

"Was I nice to you? I am very glad. Where is the music from? It is good."

She looked up at him. "I want to tell you that—that I *do* love him. I suppose I did all the time, only I didn't know it. Girls are such geese."

"Ah! You loved him all the time."

"Yes. It is hard to say, but you were so kind to me——"

"Damn my kindness," he interrupted, savagely, under his breath.

Her heart leaped with a thrill of joy, but she went on bravely. "There is only one thing I am a-afraid of,—that I shall not be able to act the part of Duchess."

He laughed. "I think there is no danger, Miss Gurney, of your being unable to act *any* part you choose. You are the best actress I ever saw in my life."

"I? How do you mean?"

"I mean that you were a good enough actress to fool me completely, and I am not a baby. I must congratulate you on that fact, as well as on your matrimonial achievement."

For one second she looked into his eyes, her own bewilderingly full of a mixture of sentiments, and then she said, simply, "Thanks. Will you take me to my place, please?"

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

ON the west terrace of Castle Roccabianca, two ladies sat watching the splendour of the setting sun. By them, on a small table, lay a small silver tea-service and four or five delicate cups. The wicker-chairs standing about were covered with light wraps and books. The spot wore the unmistakable air of being a favourite lounging-place.

Of the two ladies, one, a frail little brunette with great, green eyes, lay back in her chair, one slight hand on her yellow-covered book, her cheek against a silk pillow.

The other one, who was several years younger, held a magazine on her knees, and was slowly cutting the pages with a long silver knife.

Below the terrace, to the right, some young people were playing tennis, their voices agreeably softened by distance.

"A disgusting book," observed the little woman at last, removing her hand and looking at the page.

"Then why do you read it?"

They spoke in French.

"My dear Violetta! Why does one squeeze in one's waist and blacken one's eyebrows?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I don't, myself."

"And I do," answered Bianca de Brésilly, mournfully.

The Duchess laughed shortly. She was evidently not in a good humour. "Here comes Piero again. That boy is too lazy for words," she went on, as one of the tennis-players came up the steps, his racket on his shoulder.

"*Poveretto!* And you call it laziness, *parbleu!*"

The little Countess shut her eyes in a malicious laugh.

The young man who joined them, sitting down in a chair facing both, was a tall, broad youth, with the queer bronze

colour of the Sicilian, and a red mouth just fringed with silky black.

"Mariana and Tito are too idiotic," he explained. "Engaged lovers are disgusting."

"And married ones?" asked Bianca.

"Worse,—when they're married to each other."

The Duchess frowned.

"Don't try to be clever, d'Argenti,—it is not a success," she said, coldly.

"The humblest of your slaves obeys. I will be serious. Who are coming to-night?"

"Arnaldi, the Becca's, and Cavaleone."

Argenti glanced quickly at the Countess, who had taken up her book again. "Cavaleone! I wish he were not coming; he is horribly dull. I wonder if he always was, or if it is only the slow advance of age?"

"I don't find him dull; do you, Violetta?"

"Of course you don't," retorted the young man, biting his red lip in a way

that made his mouth crooked,—a trick of his.

"But we others! I wonder why Vittorio asked him."

"I daresay because he chose to do so, d'Argenti."

The Countess rose. "I am going in, Violetta, I am tired. Arrivederci."

When she was out of hearing, the Duchess turned to d'Argenti.

"I forbid you insulting my guests, Conte," she said in Italian. "You are very impertinent."

"What's he to Hecuba?" he answered in English. "He is not her husband, or her brother, or her cousin. And I had had enough of her, besides. Oh, yes, I did it on purpose, of course. I have not seen you all day."

"You have seen me repeatedly."

"Not alone, and I wanted you alone. Violetta——" his face glowed with a rush of colour as he spoke her name.

"I am Duchessa di Roccabianca," she said, frowning. "*Basta!*"

"Now you are angry, and going to leave me. I am the most unfortunate wretch in the world. Why do you treat me this way?"

"I do not like you. You annoy my friends, and you annoy me. Now, good-bye, and remember, I will not permit you to be rude to my guests."

He sprang up with clenched hands. "And I will not permit *you* to treat me like a dog. Why should I not speak of Paolo Cavaleone as I choose before Bianca de Brésilly? What is it to me that he is her lover? I——"

Without turning, she walked across the terrace, her long skirts trailing. Her face was white with anger and discomfort. She could not, even now, after years spent in Roman society, hear things called by their primitive names.

Facts she could endure,—and had indeed become used to many things that had unfeignedly shocked her at first, but her ears were still sensitive.

At dinner that night she hardly spoke.

Her guests, old friends for the greater part, were used to her attacks of calm silence, and paid no heed.

But d'Argenti knew what it meant, and he sulked conspicuously throughout the meal, to the amusement and comments of the others.

"Poor boy," said the Marchesa Altieri, whose little daughter, just out of her convent, sat on d'Argenti's left, "she is very cruel to him."

And Silvia Altieri saw, with her downcast eyes, much to amuse her.

Up to this evening her visit had been dreadfully stupid. The only young man who was not engaged in an engrossing affair with one of the married women was d'Argenti, and he, she soon saw, was in love with the Duchess. Then Paolo Cavaleone, whom she knew she had been brought to meet, had not come, and the only other girl, Mariana Cavaleone, his cousin, was engaged.

The convent had been much more fun. There were, at least, plenty of girls, and

then books to be read on the sly, and bonbons to be crunched at night under the bed-clothes.

She glanced up the table at her hostess.

The Duchess was slightly less slender than when she married, and her soft hair was of a warmer tinge. Otherwise she had changed but little. Her mobile face was capable of so many expressions that no one, probably even herself, knew which was its natural one.

She wore a queer gown of brick-coloured velvet, and a great rope of pearls was twisted about her neck. Silvia decided to have a rope of pearls when she was married. And it surely wouldn't be long before her mother succeeded in finding a husband for her. She had two millions of francs for her dot.

Roccabianca had grown fat. His was the white fat of Italians. His hair was as thick as ever, and under his eyes hung small sacks. Silvia privately admired him, finding his "air of having lived," very attractive. By him sat a big, red-haired

woman, the wife of the French Ambassador, on his left the Princess Asprodente, famous for her oaths and her wicked stories. It was a merry party; Roccabianca never invited bores.

When dinner was over, and the women were again in the big, empty salon with its splendidly decorated ceiling, things were much quieter. The ladies talked languidly, and Silvia and Mariana listened.

Then the men came in, and some one sang. In the middle of the song the door opened, and a short, dark man with a beard entered. With one accord the women turned and looked at Bianca de Brésilly. She was sitting on a "pouff," her voluminous pink skirts surging around her, her delicate shoulders and face arising from the mass of tender colour like a flower. She did not move, but her colour faded suddenly, leaving two hard pink spots under her eyes.

"Poor thing, I don't think she ever painted before," Silvia's mother, full of

Christian charity, whispered to her neighbour.

The dark man shook hands with Roccabianca, after kissing the Duchess's fingers, and then went about, greeting and being greeted.

"Who is he?" Silvia asked Mariana.

"Why, you goose, it's Paolo Cavaleone. I should think *you'd* know!"

"Contessa, *buona sera!*"

Bianca smiled up at him, and held out her frail little hand.

"Good-evening, Count." And that was all.

"I hope he'll have me, oh, I hope he'll have me," the little *Altieri* said to herself. "*Madonna mia*, make him take me."

CHAPTER II

THE next morning it rained. Silvia sat with folded hands, straight as an arrow, on an uncomfortable chair for two hours, listening to the conversation. It was *very* dull!

At length some of the women went up-stairs, and the others scattered themselves about the great room in groups.

The Marchesa Altieri and the wife of the ambassador sat talking lazily for some time, without heeding the girl.

"Yes, she looked badly, poor thing,—and what wonder," said the Frenchwoman, at length. "I am sorry for her."

"So am I! But then, you know, he has absolutely ruined himself for her. It couldn't possibly have lasted much longer. I am very fond of Paolo, with all his faults."

"So I understand. They say——"

"Silvia, can't you walk about a little,

dear?" interrupted the careful mother. "You must be tired."

The young girl rose. "Oh, yes, mamma. I will go for a little while to the chapel."

With a curtsey she left the room, wrath in her heart.

"She is so *dévote*, dear child," murmured her mother, looking after her; "she is quite devoted to the Madonna. You were saying——?"

Silvia went up-stairs, through a long stone passage, and then turned to the left towards the chapel.

"I'll begin a 'neuvaine,'" she thought. "I can finish it at home, if nothing happens here."

This part of the castle being, as she knew, very little used, she was surprised at hearing voices to her left, about halfway down the passage.

Instinctively hushing her footsteps on the polished old bricks, she went on until she came to the half-open door of the room whence came the voices. It

was the old billiard-room, she knew, that had not been used for years.

Pausing, she waited. Then the speaker went on in a curiously harsh voice that she did not recognize, "I know, I know all that,—but oh, my God, it is hard!"

The girl leaned forward and peeped in through the crack of the door.

Bianca de Brésilly stood in the closed window, her hands clasped tight, and before her, his back, of course, to the door, was a man.

"It is Cavaleone!"

The listener started back and leaned against the wall, in fear that the door might creak.

"I know,—I know," he was saying. "And perhaps you may believe that it is at least as hard for me as for you. But —it must be, Bianca."

The little woman's face was white, her eyes almost wild. "It will kill me."

Silvia saw him shrug his shoulders despairingly.

"Dear child! It will kill neither of us.

Such things do not kill. They only hurt. And if I didn't do it, what on earth *should* I do? Can love pay my debts?"

"Another year,—you could have waited another year," she pleaded.

"No, I couldn't. If it had been possible, I should have done it. Besides,—two millions are not always to be had."

"Paolo,—d'Argenti said yesterday that he thought her pretty. Did he only say it to torture me? Do you think her pretty?" She caught his sleeve eagerly.

"*Per Bacco!* How can d'Argenti's opinion torture you? You are so intense, *cara mia.* Yes; I do think her rather pretty."

"Ah?" She leaned against the dusty window and hid her face in her hands.

Silvia hardly dared breathe. It was *too* exciting. She would write every word of it to Luisella.

Then Cavaleone took the weeping woman in his arms and kissed her slowly.

"Don't cry," he said; "you know I love you, that I have loved you for years.

My marriage will make no difference in that. None whatever!"

"Paolo!" With the sudden strength of feeble women, she pushed him away.

"It will make a difference, with God's help! I have been a wicked woman, but *that*,—I am not so base as that."

He put his hands in his pockets and looked at her resignedly. "That, of course, is for you to decide. But you must remember that only a cruel necessity has parted us. My love has not changed."

Yet even the girl at the door felt the relief in his voice.

"Now you must go. I'll wait until you have been gone ten minutes," she said, "and then I'll go back to my room. Paolo,—good-bye, and—be good to her. Women have an awful capacity for pain."

Down the dusky passage scudded a little blue figure on noiseless feet, and in a minute Silvia Altieri was kneeling piously before the old picture of the

Madonna, before which a wick burned, floating in a glass of olive oil.

She was very *dévote*, as her mother had said.

That day, after luncheon, Paolo Cavaleone asked the Duchess of Roccabianca if he might have the honour of a few words privately with her.

"Yes," she said. "I shall be in my boudoir at three, if that is convenient to you."

"A thousand thanks."

The Duchess knew what was coming, and, pacing up and down the little room, twisting an ivory paper-knife in her strong hands, she tried to decide what answer she would give him.

She was a worldly woman in every way, a woman who had no principle to speak of, and a woman who, in arriving at a desired end, found nearly every means worthy of her use.

But this was something different. "She is only seventeen," she said to herself. "Poor little thing." Again:

"And yet, if it is not he, it might easily be some one worse. He is not a bad sort,—and her mother will be pleased. Besides, if I don't do it, some one else will."

Her face was weary and pale as she walked. At last she sank down on a chaise-longue and, opening a little drawer in the table near her, took out a small ebony box. Shaking it without opening it, she said aloud: "Odds, yes; even, no."

Then she opened the box. The dice were thrown so that six and three were visible.

She laughed aloud. "*Vogue la galère.* Yes, it is. *Avanti!*"

Cavaleone came in and, kissing her hand, sat down near her. "Duchessa," he began, slowly, "I have come to you, as a woman I greatly respect, to beg a great favour of you."

She inclined her head quietly and waited.

"I—I wish to ask for the hand of the Marchesina Altieri,—and I have the

honour to ask you to present my offer to the Marchesa."

The Duchess paused a second, and then said softly, "I will go with pleasure, Conte."

"I thank you a thousand times! And —I wish to assure you, Duchessa, that I— in fact, that——"

"That you mean to be a good boy."

"Yes. Elisa Altieri knows me very well,—particularly my faults,—and may I beg you to assure her——" he broke off, a frown dividing his forehead.

She understood, and rose. "If you will wait here, Conte, I will go at once."

"Oh, the *injustice* of it," she thought, bitterly, as she hurried down-stairs, "that she, poor Bianca, is now a *fault* to be forgiven him. Bah!"

The Marchesa listened gravely to her first words. Then she said, "Dear Paolo. He is *simpaticone!*"

"He also wished me to tell you that— that——" she stopped short.

The Marchesa laughed. "Dear Vio-

letta, I understand. That the affair with Biana is broken off? Of course, it has been a pity for him, but men will be men, as we all know."

"I think it has been a pity for her."

"Oh, yes, of course, I am very sorry for her. Well,—tell him, please, that I am delighted, and that he may come to me. Dear boy!"

The Duchess, as she went up-stairs, came on an old cousin of her husband, a student and man of letters, of whom she was rather fond.

"Luigi," she said, impetuously, "tell me, am I *crazy* that I am still shocked by things?"

"By what things, my dear?"

"Good Heavens,—you know. Every woman in the house has her lover,—it is all rotten, all of it. You are a good man. What do you think of it?"

The old man looked at her curiously. "My dear Violetta, I am nearly seventy-five years old, and I have found that what I think matters not one bit. That what

is to be is to be,—learn this. Live and let live. Say your prayers, and let things take their course."

"And if I, your nephew's wife, was as these women?" she went on, passionately.

"Then I should say, don't let any one find you out."

She stared at him for a second, and then burst out laughing. "You are right. I am a fool,—or rather, my nerves are out of order. The joke of it is, Gigi *mio*, that I'm the only one of these women who has no religion."

At the top of the stairs she met d'Argenti.

"I am going to-night," he said, abruptly.

"Why?"

"Because,—I can't stand it any longer. I love you, and you are killing me."

A rush of colour came to her face, and, leaning forward, she laid her hand on his arm.

"Piero,— do not go," she said, gently.

Then, with easy swiftness, she had left him.

That evening at dinner she was gayer than she had been for weeks.

D'Argenti watched her in wonder. Her face was full of colour and sparkle, and her eyes, meeting his from time to time, were full of happiness. And the woman was happy.

"In Rome do as the Romans do," she said over and over to herself.

And d'Argenti, a year younger than herself, had a certain charm for her. There was something in the poise of his head that reminded her strongly of Gordon Blair,—and Gordon Blair, through all her vicissitudes, she still remembered with a sort of sad tenderness.

She was a woman who needed a *chagrin* to make her happy.

Then she was not afraid of Piero d'Argenti or of herself. Her self-knowledge had grown with her years.

So she smiled and talked, filled with

a mocking amusement of her own mood that day, and was brilliantly happy.

The dinner was nearly over when a servant brought her something on a silver salver.

Suddenly, while d'Argenti's eyes were fixed on her, she rose.

"Vittorio," she cried, harshly, "Grandmother is dying,—I must go home."

CHAPTER III

WAYNE sat by the bed, his hand on hers as it lay inert on the silk coverlet. It was evening, and the sunlight, softened by the vines at the window, fell in on the bed, on her still old face and on his head.

His face was in the shadow of the chair in which he sat. Just within the door leading into the next room sat a strange woman in a white apron and gray gown,—the nurse.

No one had stirred or spoken for over an hour, when the sick woman said, faintly, "Peter?"

"Mary Anne?" He leaned out of the shadow towards her.

"Has she come?"

"Not yet. The train will be due in ten minutes. Do you want anything? Shall the nurse move you a little?"

"No," she answered, shortly; "I don't like the nurse. She bites her nails."

Then there was another silence. The shadows deepened, the sun had gone; the nurse rose and closed the window. "When she comes, wake me up, Peter, if I'm asleep."

"Of course, Mary Anne."

After a while he said, "The train has come. Shall I not read you a little from the Bible?"

"If you want to. It is a good book."

Wayne sighed. "Mary Anne,—I have been thinking,—wouldn't you like to see Mr. Lane?"

Her hand moved impatiently under his. "Of course, I shouldn't. Don't you dare bring him to see me, Peter Wayne."

"Of course not, if you don't want to see him, dear. I only thought——"

"You only thought that, now I'm lying here helpless, he might get the better of me. I don't want him, I tell you."

"Very well. Hark!" He rose and

went to the window. "It is she, Mary Anne. Beth."

The sick woman said nothing, and in two minutes Beth was in the room, kneeling by the bed. "Oh, my darling old Granny, my darling old Granny."

Wayne's great mouth worked. From the old woman's hard eyes stole two tears.

"Beth, my little girl," she muttered, with difficulty. The nurse lighted the lamp, and Beth, rising, bit her lips to keep from laughing at the grotesque shadow of Wayne's profile on the ceiling.

"Sit down. I want to see you," her grandmother said, and the young woman obeyed, taking off her small travelling hat and unfastening her jacket.

Mrs. Gurney's eyes travelled slowly over her, and then with a laugh, "You've dyed your hair."

"Granny, Granny! Don't you like it? It was turning so dark, and made me look like a washed-out Italian instead of a

dark American. And to think that you have discovered it at once."

"What did your husband say?"

"He never noticed it." She rose. "I will go to my room and change my dress. I am tired, as you can imagine."

When she was in her room she locked the door and sat down on the bed. Laughing at herself, she felt the Duchess slip away, leaving the old Beth Gurney in her place.

"And now I will play sick-nurse and charm every one," she said, aloud. "Oh, Beth, Beth!" Then quickly, deftly, she went to work, without calling her maid, who would be a jarring note in the new scene. She put on a house-dress, and then, with a little cry of pleasure, found on the closet-shelf a pair of shabby old red shoes, one of her pet vanities in the old days. She put them on, and went back to the sick-room.

"Are you hungry, Beth?"

It was Wayne who spoke.

"Yes, Uncle Peter."

"Then let us go down-stairs, dear. She is asleep. She sleeps a great deal."

Beth followed him, and in the hall took his arm.

"Isn't that a good sign,—that she sleeps?"

"Weakness, dear."

She kissed him again, and wondered how she could have learned never to think of him all these years. After all, home was best, and under her acquired Italian-ness, of which she had been so proud, she was still an American.

They sat down at the table, and a strange maid brought in supper.

"I ordered it," said the old man, wistfully; "I hope you still like the old things?"

Her eyes filled with tears as she recognized the fried chicken, the little soda-biscuits, like tiny accordions with their fluted sides, the tin coffee-pot,—Mrs. Gurney always had her coffee made in a tin pot. Then there was strawberry jam.

"Oh, Uncle Peter," she cried, with a

break in her voice, "you have remembered *everything!*"

"We have never forgotten, Beth. *Old* people remember."

"And I, too, have never forgotten, though I have never come," she cried, full of a remorse that hurt her.

"I know," he answered, tranquilly. "We never blamed you. How is your husband, dear?"

She frowned impatiently. She hated thinking of anything but the peace of the old house, the return of the old life. "He is well. He—wished to be remembered to you."

She was hungry, and the plain, homely fare was delicious. The coffee, brown and clear, so different from the black European coffee, was as nectar to her. Wayne watched her with a gentle pleasure under his sadness.

"It was sudden," he said, presently. "She was in the garden tying up a honeysuckle when it came. She just fell. She has little pain, thank God."

"Paralysis?"

"Yes. But now it is her heart. The doctor says she will not suffer."

Beth in her content had almost forgotten the reason for her visit. Now she started. "Uncle Peter, she *must* not die. She must not!"

His prominent eyes filled, and he took out his white silk handkerchief. "Dear child, One who knows says she must go."

The young woman rose, her face white. "It is cruel, unjust,—she doesn't want to die,—and I need her. Oh, Uncle Peter, I need my grandmother."

Her heart was full of hot love and rebellion. The old childish love, reinforced by the woman's need. "I have no one but her."

"You have your husband, Beth, and me, and—God forgive me for saying it last,—God Himself."

She frowned impatiently. She as little wanted the one as the other.

Then, how could God separate Wayne from his only friend?

They went up-stairs in silence. In her thoughts, Beth often thought of God, and she was by no means one of those who declare their atheism.

It was that she lacked the faculty of belief, not that she cultivated, so to say, the Religion of Unbelief.

They sat down in the quiet sick-room, and for two hours no one spoke.

At length the nurse whispered that they had better go. "She is asleep, and if she awakes and finds you here, it may excite her."

So they left the room, and separated on the landing.

"I'm staying here, you know," Wayne told her; "I will call you if anything happens. Good-night."

She was asleep, hours later, when some one knocked at the door. "Beth,—she wants you."

Beth grew ice-cold, and trembled so that she could not move. Had it come, then, this thing that she had dreaded all her life, and until now avoided?

"Is she w-worse?" she managed to ask.

"No. Only she can't sleep, and she wants you."

A few minutes later, she went down the dark hall, a candle in her hand. She was afraid of the dark, and hurried, her eyes fixed on the light coming from the door of the sick-room.

"Peter thought you might be afraid of the dark," her grandmother said, as she entered, "but you never were a coward, with all your faults."

And the young woman felt a quiver of satisfaction at the words.

"You wanted me, Granny dear?" she said, blowing out her candle.

"Yes, Beth; long ago you wrote me of your jewels. Have you them with you'"

"Yes. I'm going to put them in the bank to-morrow. Adelina brought them by mistake."

"I want to see them," went on the old woman.

"To see them *now?*"

"Yes,—why not, Beth, if she wants to?"

Wayne had no collar on, and his old neck looked pitifully thin and cold.

"Of course, Granny. I'll bring them at once. You will enjoy seeing them, I'm sure."

She went back to her room and opened the box, which was under her bed. Suddenly a thought struck her, and taking from her trunk a low black velvet bodice, she put it on.

In three minutes she was dressed, down to the waist, below which shimmered a filmy white silk petticoat. Then, on her ruffled hair, she put the great crown of diamonds, and in her ears the studs. Laughing, pleased with the picture in the glass, she fastened the necklace, and then, taking the jewel box under her arm, ran down the hall.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Gurney. "Splendid!"

Beth bent and let her grandmother look closely at the wonderful stones, then

she took them off and laid them on the bed, while she arrayed herself in a glory of sapphires.

Lastly came the pearls. The old woman's eyes glowed under her thick brows. "That was what you always needed, Beth, to be beautiful," she said. "And you are beautiful."

Then while Beth took off the pearls her grandmother fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

TWO or three days later, Beth was sitting alone in the sitting-room, when Wayne came in.

"Have they gone?" he asked, falling wearily into a chair.

"Yes. They were very kind. I had not known that old Mrs. Carey was dead."

"Cancer. We have much to be thankful for, Beth."

"In that poor old Mrs. Carey died of cancer? Oh, shame on you, Uncle Peter!"

He smiled. "You know what I mean. Is she asleep?"

"Yes. The nurse says her strength is wonderful. I am so glad to be here to help a little. I have been very selfish," she added, with a sudden impulse.

He shook his head. "You are young, dear. Beth,—I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

"Of course I will, if I can. What is it?"

The old man paused, rose, and reached down the white rose-jar.

"She filled it herself, only in June," he muttered, absently. "And only for me! She never opened it herself, I know she didn't. My grandmother gave it to me. I loved it when I was a tiny little chap. Then I gave it to her, and she always kept it full for me."

Beth watched him pitifully, yet bitterly uncomfortable. Her old frantic hatred of "scenes" had grown stronger with the years.

"You were going to ask me to do something for you," she said, at last.

He looked up. "Oh, yes. I am growing very forgetful. Beth, you know about your grandmother's unhappy religious views?"

"Yes, Uncle Peter."

"Did she ever talk to you of them?"

"No, never."

"Well, I must tell you how it was.

You mustn't blame her. It was inherited, I really believe. Her father was a brilliant man,—a man who travelled and knew the thinking men of his time. Unhappily, the thinking men of that time were very frequently atheists. Mr. Russell lost his belief. Your grandmother —I mean your great-grandmother—was a good woman, and a religious one. She brought up your grandmother to believe, but the child knew that her father, whom she adored, believed nothing, and—she copied him. I remember the scene there was when she refused to be confirmed. It ended in her father taking her side, and that was the beginning of the end. Then she married." He paused, his head sunk on his breast. "She was married here, in this room. It was the parlour then, before the wing was built. She wore curls on her temples, and they bobbed when she talked. When George was born, she began to bring him up in her own way. William didn't care. He was quite indifferent to such things. And

Mary Anne brought up her boy. She taught him that he must be good ; she had his father whip him when he was naughty. She taught him that lying was hideous, that truth was beautiful. But she gave him no reasons. She had, of course, none to give. Take away the idea of God, who is Goodness, and there is no reason for anything in the world."

Beth watched him without speaking.

"He was a nice boy, George, agreeable and handsome. When his father died he was only ten. Then, of course, the whippings ceased, and that was bad for him. I once told him that he *must* be good. He shook back his hair and looked at me. 'Why?' he asked. I had nothing to say to him in answer.

"George lied. He always lied. I can't imagine where he got it from, but he did it, and it nearly killed Mary Anne. I saw it, and tried even then to have her tell him the truth. But she couldn't.

"'I can't lie to him, can I?' she used to say. Then at length, when he was a

big boy of fifteen, she consented to let me try. It was too late. He only laughed. He could not believe any more than his mother. So things went on from bad to worse."

He paused, took a deep sniff at the rose-jar, and then, looking vaguely around the room, went on.

Beth lay still in her chair. She had never known the story of her father. That he had killed himself, she had learned by accident when a little thing of ten, but she had never told of her discovery, and had never asked her grandmother one question about her parents.

"He was expelled from Yale. Then he took to drinking. At last he stopped drinking, and settled down, working in the bank. For some time he went on very well,—in big things. Then he married. He never told his mother of his engagement, but one day just came in with a girl on his arm and said, 'Mother, here's my wife.' She was a pretty little thing,—a dressmaker from Clarkton.

Mary Anne was good to her, took her in the house, and did everything for her. She was a good enough woman, but, of course, uneducated, and as weak as water. George was fond of her, but, having once got her, he began drinking again. At last,—he forged my name for two thousand dollars."

Beth's eyes closed slowly, but she did not move.

"That was a terrible time. The cashier had his doubts and brought the cheque to me. I said to pay the money,—that it was all right. The man went away, and I locked my door and prayed. I prayed all night.

"Early in the morning he came. He gave me back the money and begged my pardon. Then he went away. At ten o'clock Hank came over and told me what had happened. George had hanged himself. Now all my life since then I have been praying that she may realize his repentance. He *did* repent, or why did he come to me? Why did he come, I say?"

His voice rose, and he stood up, a

shaking hand held out. "God can forgive. I know He has forgiven that poor boy. I know it."

"Hush, Uncle Peter!" She pressed him back into his chair and knelt by him.

"Beth,—I—forgot that you were there, dear. What have I told you?"

"Only what I ought to have known long ago. Hush,—I am quite calm, you see;" she was very white, but her voice was steady.

"You wanted to ask me to do something for you, Uncle Peter," she went on, gently; "what was it?"

"I want *you* to try. Try to make her believe. She is dying. Mary Anne is dying, and she does not believe."

A feeling of physical sickness came over the young woman,—her old horror of talking of "such things."

"You must make her see, Beth. You are his own child. She will listen to you."

There was a pause, during which she rose. Then she said quietly, "Very well, Uncle Peter; I will try."

CHAPTER V

THAT evening, when Beth had gone to her room, she dismissed her maid, and, sitting down by the lamp, opened a book she had brought up from the library. The book was dusty, and before beginning to read she wiped it carefully, that it might not soil her white dressing-gown.

She read two hours without stopping, except to make certain notes on a sheet of paper on the table. The book interested her. It was the Bible.

True to her promise to Wayne, she was preparing her attack on her grandmother's atheism, and, knowing but little of the Book, she studied it with care. A queer smile disturbed from time to time the full curves of her lips,—a smile of amusement, tempered with disdain.

"Here I am posing again," she said aloud, as she at last rose and closed the book.

"Of all the queer incidents in my life, I think this about the most bizarre. That *I* should attempt to convert any one."

She went to sleep, thinking with dreamy admiration of the beauty of the Psalms.

"Like every one else," she told herself, "he excused himself too much,—'my enemies without cause,'—'the wicked who are purposed to overthrow my goings;' but he was a great poet."

The next day it rained, a soft, incessant rain, which was very welcome to her. No one would come to-day, surely, and she was much interested in her schemes for the afternoon.

"My worst enemy can't say that I'm lukewarm," she thought, laughing at her own enthusiasm.

At length the time came. The early dusk was pressing in at the windows, the silence was unbroken. Beth sat in the chair by the bed, and Wayne was in his own room.

"Granny, shall I not read to you?"

Mrs. Gurney's voice was very weak, as she answered, "Oh, yes; if you want to. There is a magazine somewhere in the room."

Then suddenly Beth's old intense embarrassment came back, flooding her with heat. She rose to get the magazine, shivering with discomfort, when the thought of Wayne strengthened her.

"I thought,—something from the Bible, perhaps?"

"The Bible? Very well; I've no objection, if you prefer it."

The old woman's voice was stronger, and she moved her head a little that she might look at her granddaughter.

"Are you fond of it yourself?"

"Yes, Granny. I like the Psalms best."

She opened the Bible and, with a hasty glance at her memorandum, began to read the twenty-third Psalm.

Her beautiful voice glorified the splendid words, and as she read her eyes filled with tears of artistic pleasure.

When she had finished, she went on with a hardly perceptible pause with the forty-second.

"It is beautiful, Beth."

"Yes, Granny."

"Read it again."

The young woman obeyed: "As the hart panteth——"

When she had finished, Mrs. Gurney said, "In my Father's house——" Then hearing the pages turned in a helpless effort to find the place, she added: "Fourteenth John."

Beth had not read the beautiful chapter for many years. As she went on she remembered her Sunday-school class, the girls she had sat beside,—her teacher, the light on the wall from the stained window.

At length she stopped. "Granny," she said, "you have never talked to me about your—religious belief."

"Because I have none."

Beth stopped, arrested by the sharpness in her voice.

"You must have known it for years," went on Mrs. Gurney; "you were far too sharp not to understand it."

After a minute she added with a feeble laugh, "Poor Peter, it has been a great cross to him,—and he to me! How he has tormented me."

She paused, and then after a little time went on. "I'm fond of the Bible. It is a wonderful book, and Christianity is a beautiful fable,—though the descriptions of heaven are absurd,—with the red horses, and the beasts with harps, and golden vials of odours."

Beth was annoyed. She had undertaken this task for Wayne, and now for her own sake resented being beaten.

"Granny," she said, "I have an idea that you believe more than you admit."

She was startled at the effect of her words. Mrs. Gurney moved suddenly, and tried to sit up, clutching at the bedclothes.

"How dare you, Beth Gurney!"

"Dear Granny, it would make us so happy," pleaded the young woman.

"Be still!" shouted Mrs. Gurney, with a sudden access of strength. "It is Peter who has put you up to this. Leave the room at once. Nurse!"

The nurse came in, and the old woman caught her arm eagerly: "Make her go, —I won't hear her. I won't be tormented because I'm helpless. Turn me over, nurse."

The nurse turned her over, and she lay perfectly mute without stirring.

"What was it, ma'am?" The nurse had beckoned Beth into the next room. "You mustn't irritate her."

The Duchess of Roccabianca stared for a few seconds at the woman, and the woman's face changed ludicrously. "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

Beth went down the hall and knocked at Wayne's door. He was kneeling by his bed, his grotesque face shining with something she had never seen.

"Well?" he said, without rising.

She shook her head. "I am sorry, Uncle Peter. I did my best, but it only made her angry."

He did not speak, and she left the room at once.

CHAPTER VI

ALL that night the old woman slept quietly without waking. The next morning, when Beth went in, she was shocked at the change in her grandmother, and for the first time for days she again realized poignantly that death was inevitably coming.

"How are you, dear?" she asked, gently.

Mrs. Gurney opened her eyes. "Beth, —promise me you won't let him come in. He'd torment me, and—I am so weak."

"He would not torment you, Granny."

"Yes, he would, I tell you. And I won't be tormented. Promise me that he shan't come."

"I promise, dear. He shan't come. But he will feel very badly about it."

"I know. Poor Peter. But I am too weak to be tormented."

Her resentment against her grand-

daughter had gone without leaving a trace of itself. "She realizes that I was only posing," the young woman told herself.

Very gently she told Wayne. He said nothing, but his face was full of bitter sorrow. After a while he said slowly, "She would never have turned against me if she had not been ill."

"Of course not,—and I am sure in a little while she will send for you, Uncle Peter. How could she do without you?"

The doctor, when he came, told them that the end was near. "It has gone very well," he said; "there was no hope from the beginning, and she has had very little pain."

"When?" asked Beth, with stiff lips.

"It is a question of hours." Then he went away, and told the first person he met that people were wrong in saying that Beth Gurney had no heart.

Beth went up-stairs, and throwing herself on the bed cried bitterly. "Oh, my

poor old granny. You must die, and you don't want to. It is cruel, terrible! And I have only you,—only you."

Her heart ached with remorse and the frantic grief of a child who cannot understand. At length she crept into the sick-room and, kneeling by the bed, laid her cheek on the wrinkled old hand. "Granny, can you hear me?"

"Of course I can, child; I was never deaf."

"Granny, you were always so good to me. You took care of me and loved me always."

She felt the stiff fingers try to move under her face.

"Will you forgive me for being selfish and horrid? That I didn't come to see you after I was married?"

"My dear, of course. I might have been better to you, perhaps, but I was good according to my power. And you were the same. No two people are alike."

"Granny, do you still love me?"

"Yes, dear. Now I must rest, I am tired."

In the silence Wayne crept to the door and stood there humbly. At length Beth rose and led him away.

After luncheon, the nurse, coming down-stairs, met him. "You might as well go in, Mr. Wayne. She won't know you're there."

Faithful and patient, the old man sat by her all the afternoon. When the lights were lit she stirred uneasily, and said, "Peter!"

"Yes, Mary Anne. I am here."

Then her eyes closed again. The air was heavy with the silence of waiting.

Nine o'clock striking startled the watchers. It began to rain, and the hissing of the water on the leaves was soothing to Beth's tired nerves. Leaning back, she closed her eyes. She did not hear the clock strike again.

Then suddenly the dying woman cried, "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.' Peter Wayne, pray for me."

With a great, terrible sob, Wayne slipped to his knees, and began.

When he paused, she took up his words, and, to his amazement, repeated the whole of the sixth Psalm without faltering. Then she said, "'All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.' I believe, Peter. I have struggled, and am conquered."

"Thank God! thank God!" Tears streamed down his face.

"Peter,—it was for him,—for my boy. If he was in eternal punishment——"

"I know, I know. God be praised!"

"I was 'he who sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not.' But He will forgive me, for I have prayed."

She did not speak again. From the next room a low, grating noise came. The nurse was asleep and snoring. Beth rose, and, tiptoeing in, awoke her. Then, after an instant's hesitation, she went down-stairs, and, passing through the dining-room, into the kitchen. At the

table, his head on his arm, asleep, sat Hank, the "hired man."

Beth looked at the clock. It was a quarter-past one. "No wonder I am hungry," she thought. Taking the lamp, she went into the cool-room, and, opening the ice-box, took out a pan of milk and a freshly-cut ham.

"I suppose it is awful, my being hungry," she thought, as she cut the ham, and then opened the bread-box; "but I am."

When her sandwich was made, she dipped a cup into the pan of milk and raised it to her lips. Then, with a sudden fantastic idea, she carefully poured the milk back. "It is Granny's milk for to-morrow morning. She will not want it, but I must not drink it."

Contenting herself with a cup of water from the filter and her sandwich, she made her impromptu meal.

When she was satisfied, she went upstairs again, without waking Hank.

No one had moved in the sick-room,

and she took her place again at the foot of the bed. It was coming now,—Death, this thing that she had always so feared, and she was no longer afraid.

"It's because I am not real in any one point," she told herself. "I would eat blubber in a week if I were with Esquimaux." Then, with a little self-congratulatory shiver, she felt that her nature gave her the advantage over others less adaptable.

Just as the dawn began to break, the end came. Mrs. Gurney opened her eyes, said faintly, "God bless you, Peter. I am going to my boy," and it was over.

Wayne was kneeling by the bed, Beth standing, her hands pressed together. Her grandmother had forgotten her! She watched the wonderful change pass over the old woman's face, and then gently left the room. Lying down on her bed, she fainted. Wayne knelt long, and then, rising slowly, went down-stairs. Opening the door, he stepped out on the wet grass, and, crossing to the rose-

bed, cut with his knife two half-blown "Maiden's Blush" roses.

Then he went up-stairs again and into her room. Pushed to the back of the table was her work-basket. The old man opened it, and, taking out a bit of thread, laboriously tied the roses into a clumsy nosegay.

Then he pulled up the curtains and let in the early sun. Her face was beautiful to him in its great peace. "Thank God!" he said, aloud; and, bending over her, he kissed her cheek and laid his nosegay in her hand. Then, as he turned away, his eyes fell on the scar on her cheek, and a queer smile came to his shaking lips. "For sixty years," he said, softly, "and I never dared ask her how she got it."

CHAPTER VII

THE folding-doors were open, and across the hall, the dining-room doors.

And the rooms, and the hall, excepting a narrow passage, and a small place in the parlour, were closely packed with small, highly varnished yellow chairs,—chairs that served in turn for funerals, ball supper-rooms, and "tea-parties," of the old-fashioned, sit-down kind, for the whole town.

Silently, with much dignity of demeanour, Mr. Ingalls, the undertaker, conducted the guests to their places, sometimes whispering a word decorously behind his black kid hand.

The air was heavy with the scent of waxy flowers, for in Deepwater people still sent flowers to dead friends.

Through the windows, over which the light-yellow blinds had been lowered, a

warm sun forced its way in, and in the parlour a big bee hummed sleepily over the tuberoses.

Slowly the rooms filled. The wife of Mr. Fry, the rival undertaker of the town, who, with patient skill, was winding her way into society, sat in the corner by the sitting-room door, and beside her, much to her satisfaction, was Mrs. George Lewis, a leader of the "gay set."

The coffin stood by the flower-filled fireplace,—a very elegant casket, Mrs. Fry mentally styled it, as she fanned herself solemnly. She was glad William had not "got" the funeral. She objected to this phase of his prosperous furniture business, but he insisted on continuing it, as it was his pastime.

Mrs. McLean was there, her pale lips drawn into a rigid line over her flashing golden teeth, and by her sat Judge Wilson and his wife, severest of the Brick Presbyterian Church people,—by a freak of Providence for Mr. Ingalls. In the hall Bella Lacy—still Bella Lacy—was

crying snuffily in a new handkerchief. The whole town was there. The Porters, the Barclays, who were supposed to be on the eve of a divorce, old Mrs. Hill, a recently made widow, the Carrolls, who had "struck oil" and grown rich, Maud Murray, who had married one of the Porter boys and lost all her beauty with her first baby,—every one was there.

Outside, in the sun, the carriages were waiting,—"hacks" for the most part. The hearse, its door invitingly open, was backed up to the curb, and everything was ready.

Suddenly, within the house there was a subdued rustle of excitement; heads were turned discreetly towards the hall.

Beth, dressed of course in heavy black, came in, leaning on Peter Wayne's arm. Behind them came a cousin of her grandmother's whom she had never seen before, a tall, thin man, with a "goatee."

They took their places behind the coffin, and waited.

"I am the Resurrection and the

Life——" Mr. Lane, the new rector of St. John's, had a resonant voice, which he used to good effect. The beautiful words fell slowly, dramatically, from his lips, amid the smell of lilies and tuberoses.

Beth listened. She was worn out mentally and physically. When she had recovered from her faint she had cried for hours, half from pity for her grandmother, half in pity for herself. Her grandmother, the only creature of kin she had on earth, had left her. Her utter helplessness angered her, and the mingled pains were unrelieved by any religious sentiments.

That her grandmother had gone, she knew: where, she neither knew nor cared. She had loved her grandmother, and now the old woman had left her, and she was alone.

To her own surprise, she realized that the tie of blood was very strong in her.

The thought of Italy sickened her. With her horrible clear-sightedness she

realized not only the utter futility of her life there, the aimlessness of it all, but also, and what was worse for her, that the charm of it had fled forever with the novelty.

She did not love her husband; in the six years of her married life she had not made one real friend.

She, the Duchess of Roccabianca, was an alien in her husband's country, and, now that her grandmother was dead, she had no country of her own. She was an alien everywhere.

She smiled grimly behind her thick veil as she realized that for once she had no need to play a *rôle*. Her desolateness, her grief, were so real as to be self-sufficient.

And in the black box lay her grandmother,—her dear old Granny. And they were going to take her away and bury her.

A bee hummed noisily, and made foolish dives at the flowers.

She wished she might go into a con-

vent,—or, no,—she wished she might live on alone in the quiet, old-fashioned house.

An unopened letter from Roccabianca was in her pocket. She had not opened it, fearing the inevitable confusion it would throw into her thoughts. She wished to mourn her grandmother in peace.

At length the short service was over, and the coffin was carried out by the pall-bearers.

With an effort Beth stifled a cry. They were taking her grandmother away! The horror of being buried came over her like the sickening dizziness from a blow. No air,—no light,—the earth on one! She forgot that the dead do not feel.

As she took Wayne's arm she staggered a little. Then, going down the hall towards the dazzling blot of light that was the front door, she saw, through her crape veil, Gordon Blair standing in a corner of the sitting-room, his arms

folded. And instantly the weight left her breast, and the moan she had been repressing turned to a cry of gladness even harder to keep back.

"Wretch,—brute that I am!" she said to herself, as with bent head she walked down the path to the gate. "*Inhuman!* How can I be glad when she is there in that horrible hearse?"

And then, taking her place in the carriage, she added, with the characteristic frankness which played so great a *rôle* in her twisted nature, "Yet I am happy. He is here. Oh, Gordon Blair, Gordon Blair."

All the way to the cemetery the name said itself over and over in her brain. Only the name. She was too tired to think, but the slow wheels ground it out with a rough rhythm, "Gordon Blair, Gordon Blair."

When it was over and they reached the house again, Wayne came in with her. He stayed until evening, thinking that he must not leave her alone. And she

waited patiently, sitting in silence in the corner where Blair had stood, leaning her head against the book-case against which he had leaned.

Wayne was very quiet. On his face was something very like happiness, Beth thought.

Once he said, "She is gone, dear, and I am left; but I am not sorry. You, too, are not sorry, dear. I see it in your eyes."

"Oh, Uncle Peter," she cried, throwing herself on his shoulder; "oh, Uncle Peter!"

At last he went, walking alone to his own house, over the way he had taken so many thousand times. And alone in the library stood Beth, with shining eyes and white cheeks. "To-morrow he will come," she said, aloud, "to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

THE clock struck half-past ten. Beth took up the little old yellow plush work-bag in which, ever since she could remember, her grandmother had kept her embroidery, and opened it.

She unrolled the strip of finest lawn, and, holding it up to the pale light, examined the work.

It was a pattern of heliotrope and maiden-hair fern, the design being, as she knew, by Mrs. Gurney herself. The work, delicately fine at first, and shaded with exquisite skill, grew coarser as it progressed, and her eyes filled as she noted the clumsy bungling of the bit stretched over the hoop.

"Poor Granny! *Dear* Granny!" she thought, her vivid imagination at once seeing the poor old woman's tired fingers struggling to continue the work so dear to her.

A rush of pity swelled her throat, and, bending her head over the table, she gently kissed the shabby little bag.

"I will always keep this by me——" Then suddenly she knew that he was there. Slowly she rose and went to him as he stood just within the door.

"I knew you would come," she said, holding out both her hands.

He took them gently and held them to his breast. "Of course I have come."

Then there was a pause, during which she looked up at him and he down at her in silence.

A wagon rattled by on the asphalt, birds were singing outside the open windows among the dusty green of the trees. A door slammed up-stairs. At length Beth said, "Then you did care?"

"Did I care? Dear, you knew it. And you?"

"I have cared all my life,—and all my life it has been the only thing that mattered. Come."

She led him to a chair, and, pushing him

gently into it, knelt on the rug by him, leaning her elbows on the arm of the chair.

"Tell me," she said.

"What is there to tell?"

"You know."

"You are not eloquent!"

Her voice broke as she tried to laugh. "Tell me that you love me."

"God knows I love you."

The sun fell in the dingy old room and across his face. He looked much older, his hair was very gray at the temples. A wave of pity came over her. Being a woman, she accepted the lines in his face and the silver in his hair as a tribute to herself. She forgot time and other things.

"Then, if you love me, why don't you kiss me?"

He started, and with impatience she understood.

"I am no longer a baby," she went on, hastily, rising. "I am twenty-six, and —I know what I'm doing."

He walked to the window and stood

looking out. Then without turning: "Tell me about your husband."

"Bah! my husband. You need have no scruples about my husband. He is at present in Norway travelling with the French Embassador to Italy,—*and his wife!*"

Blair turned. "Ah!"

"Yes. Oh, I don't in the least mind, I assure you. Besides, I am used to it."

"Poor child, poor child!"

He came back slowly and stood by her.

"Now I think I must ask you to excuse me," she said, quietly; "I have a great deal to do,—and I thank you for having come to offer me your condolences on the loss of my grandmother."

"Beth!"

"Mr. Blair? By the way, I forgot to inquire for your wife. I hope she is well?"

For a second he stood, watching her composed face, white with an anger that stung him. Then with a cry—his conventionality was conquered by something

stronger—Gordon Blair took the woman he loved in his arms and kissed her mouth.

At length she disengaged herself and held him at arm's length, her face full of light.

"Oh, my darling, my darling," she said.

He was very pale, and never, she thought, had she seen him so beautiful.

"How can I let you go?" he murmured; "how can I? When do you go back?"

She turned away. "Back?—where?"

"Home."

"I have no home. If you mean Italy,—I am never going back."

"What?"

"No; I'd rather live the rest of my days in—Kalamazoo, than go back there."

There was a short silence, then he said, "You are quite determined, Beth?"

"Absolutely."

"Then, dear, will you come with me,—somewhere far away,—will you live out your life alone with me?"

"I would go to *hell* with you. Yes." Then she added, "But Anna?"

"Anna would not care. She—we have not been together for two years. She has gone in for spiritualism, and lives at Lilydale most of the time. Beth,—shall we go? We can go to Japan or India,—wherever you like?"

"Yes. We will go. Oh, Gordon!"

She looked, in her plain, black gown, so young, so childlike, that his conscience smote him again.

"You must realize what it means, dear. It means social obliteration; it means scorn, and it means mortal sin."

She burst out laughing. "*De la morale!* Gordon, Gordon, don't *you* preach to me. I know what it means, and, on my word of honour, I don't care a pin. What people may say is nothing to me, and as to the sin,—if there is no God,—well and good, and if there is, I am not afraid of Him. He made me, and He made me what I am."

"There is a God, dear."

"Very well; I'll take my heaven on earth, that is all. Oh, my darling, my darling, we shall be together, you and I, you and I!"

A second later Hank put his head in at the window, "B—Miss Beth, them roses is ready, if you want to take 'em over now. *I'm* ready."

"Very well, Hank. I'll come at once."

Five minutes later she and Hank were walking together towards Wayne's house.

Her veil was put back, her face radiantly happy.

"Was that Gordon Blair?" asked the hired man, curiously. "Looks old, don't he? He used to be an awful purty fellow."

"Yes, Hank. He was very good-looking when he was young."

"Did you know that young Curtis has twins? He's living in Californy."

Beth laughed at the idea. Billy Curtis the father of twins! Then, as she saw Mrs. Wilson coming down the steps, the

young woman composed her face to a proper sadness.

"Glad you're out, Beth," the old lady said; "I never did believe in staying in the house."

"I am going to poor Uncle Peter. I am taking him grandmother's roses." Her eyes filled with emotional tears, to which she felt distinctly grateful.

They found Wayne standing on his porch, his hands behind his back, watching two men who were busy prying up the bricks in front of the house.

"I am a silly old man, Beth," he said, without greeting her, "but it makes me very sad that they are putting down a new sidewalk. I know every one of the old bricks,—I walked over them every day for a great many years. A great many years!" His eyes were wet.

"Come, dear," she said, "I have brought you her roses. We must plant them. I think under the library window would be the best place."

"That was a kind thought, my child.

Where are they? Ah, poor things! Thank you, Hank. You may go; Sarah will help us."

The cook came out, and between them the roses were planted.

"I can't realize it yet, Beth," the old man said, as they sat down to rest in the shade. "Twice I've put on my hat to go over."

"You must come this afternoon, dear. She will like you to come."

"Yes, you and I must be together now." Then, with a sudden frown of pain, "But you will have to go back. When must you go?"

"I—I don't know. I can stay a little longer."

"Oh, I shall be so lonely! I wish you could stay! Couldn't your husband come and live here until I go? It won't be long."

Then he cried, his mouth quivering. The complete breakdown of the old man hurt her. In her great happiness, it came with a terrible jar. Life was to be

so beautiful to her: why must it be so sad to this good man?

She soothed him with gentle words, and then, promising to come for him that afternoon to take him for a little drive into the country, she said good-bye.

CHAPTER IX

"I SHALL have two little surprises for you, Uncle Peter, when we come home," Beth said, as they settled themselves in the big "hack," with its linen cushion-covers. "Now, enjoy the drive as much as you can."

"How can I enjoy anything when Mary Anne is gone?"

"I think," she said, severely, "that you are very wicked, Uncle Peter! when you know that she is well and happy, and that she had such a beautiful death!"

"Yes, yes, I am wicked. But,—it *was* a blessed death. God's hand is strong."

"And she was old and ill, you know, and now——!" A world of religious enthusiasm was in her voice.

Wayne straightened up. "Yes, you are right, dear. I have much to be thankful for. Also, that you have the blessing of faith is a great comfort to me. I used

to fear for you at one time. It was in your blood, and—there were certain little things——"

He broke off, and looked at her anxiously.

"You never had doubts, Beth, had you?"

"No, I never had doubts."

"You were always so reserved, even as a child; but you show now, in your resignation to the will of God, that you are upheld by faith."

"Yes, Uncle Peter, I am upheld by faith."

"How I can lie!" she thought to herself, as he, content, leaned back in his place and fell into a revery. "And yet I really do mean it kindly in this case. Why should I torment him?"

Then her thoughts went back to Blair and their future. She felt a little thrill of self-approval as she realized what she considered her great faithfulness.

"For nearly twelve years I have loved him. Amid all the distractions and gayeties of Rome I never forgot him."

She did not remember the various interruptions to this love that she had met: the Englishman who came on for Blair's wedding; Savrigny; the German on the ship; a baritone who sang in Rome shortly after her marriage, of whom she had dreamed for weeks, and to whom she had sent anonymous flowers; a certain Marchese Oliveta, who had been desperately in love with her sister-in-law, and whom she had adored, suffering agonies of jealousy over his courteous disregard of her.

These were mere accidentals in the great symphony of her one love.

Besides, was not a love almost sublime that gave up for a life *à deux* and a ruined name, all the splendours of the Duchessa di Roccabianca?

Blair had, she knew, speculated successfully, and had now a small, independent fortune, but in comparison with Roccabianca he was a pauper.

She sighed as she thought of her jewels, which must, of course, go back to Rome.

And her beautiful carriages, with the closed crown on the panel. And her splendid Portiere, an immensely tall old man with the finest whiskers in Rome. She was giving up a great deal. And for what?

Her eyes swept listlessly over the flat fields shorn of their harvests. For a man who was neither rich, nor titled, nor clever. For a man, moreover, who, though he was going to run away with her, had scruples!

"I wonder," she thought, "what it is in me that binds me to Gordon Blair? I have more brains in my little finger than he has in his head. Can it be only his beauty?"

Then, with a great warmth at her heart, she finished, "But I love him. It is *Love*."

And she plumed herself on her capacity for the great passion.

Towards sunset the carriage came back through the streets and stopped at Wayne's door.

Beth got out with the old man, and, with a quick glance at the grass-plot to the left of the house, led him into the gate.

"Dear Uncle Peter," she said, her voice sweet with the pleasure she was about to give him, "shall we take a little walk?"

Slipping her arm through his, she directed his steps past the porch and a little way down the path.

"Do you not notice anything?" she said.

Wayne looked around, and then his eyes fell on a newly-made brick path that led completely around the garden. The path was covered with white sand.

"Oh, Beth!" he said. Then he leaned down, and with his hand brushed away a little sand. "My bricks! The old bricks!"

He could say no more, but went slowly along with bent head.

Beth stopped at the kitchen window, and called to Sarah to give her a broom.

Then the Duchess of Roccabianca swept the sand off the newly-laid, mossy, worn old bricks, and Wayne, following her, bade God bless her for her kind thought.

"I bought them of the contractor, and I had five men at work that it might be finished. Do you like it, really?"

"Dear," he said, "I know every brick, every crack. See that face where the brick is broken? I always fancy it looks like me."

His pleasure was great. At last they went together to the old house and had dinner.

Together with his happiness over her little scheme was a mixture of pride in her that touched her deeply.

In the evening they sat in the sitting-room, and then, on his asking her to sing, went into the parlour. She opened the old square piano. She had little voice, but sang with some taste.

He asked for hymns, and, lighting the lamp, she found the old hymn-book. With infinite patience she sang for over

an hour, "Rock of Ages," "Jerusalem the Golden," "Lead, kindly Light," each with all the stanzas.

At length he joined her with a pathetic, wavering voice that must have been a tenor years ago. "Lead, kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom——"

When it was ended, he added, "It won't be long." He had taken down the old rose-jar, and, as he spoke, it slipped from his hands to the stone before the fireplace, and broke into a hundred pieces.

"I am glad it is broken," he said, slowly, as she gathered up the sweet brown rose-leaves. "She is gone, and it is gone, and I shall go soon."

"Uncle Peter," she said, as she accompanied him to the door towards ten o'clock, "I have another surprise for you. I am going to stay with you."

"Stay? What will your husband say?"

"Oh, he will let me."

"He must be very good."

"Yes; he is very good. And I am going to stay with you."

CHAPTER X

SEPTEMBER 10.

DEAR PHIL,—The end was very quiet. He died in my arms, dear old man. I am glad I stayed with him, for I loved him.

Now I am going to tell you something about myself. To-morrow I am going away with Gordon Blair. You will not be shocked, I know. You will be sorry, but you are too clever to be surprised. I wonder if you are clever enough not to pity me?

I need no pity, Phil.

I have loved him all my life. Do you remember how you used to confess me years ago, when I was a goose of a thing with nothing to confess but my egregious vanity?

Now, at the last, I am going to confess to you again,—I must end it all smoothly

and appropriately,—you will remember my passion for graceful conclusions. In the first place, I love him and he loves me; and, secondly, neither his wife nor my husband will care, after the first shock.

Now, to go back. Roccabianca was very kind to me always. When I first learned that his kindness was not in the least incompatible with all manner of unfaithfulness, I was in despair.

Then I was angry, and at last simply indifferent. You may remember my remarkable capacity for adaptability? *Bien,*—I adapted myself in that case also. At first, I greatly enjoyed being a Roman duchess. I loved the "pomps and vanities," I loved the atmosphere of century-old luxury. And I learned Italian in six months so well that people almost forgot that I was an American. Then, suddenly, I found that I was bored. I tried various kinds of distraction, among others, "The Church."

Cardinal Roccabianca attempted to con-

vert me, but "convert" meant "change," and how could I, who had no religion, be changed to another?

It was, of course, impossible, though the æsthetic side of it pleased me,—and after amusing myself with a sort of spiritual flirtation, I went in for globe-trotting.

Roccabianca is a capital traveller, and it was really delightful roaming about with him, for you must realize that we were always on very good terms.

When we came home I tried flirting. That didn't answer, for Italians do not know how to flirt,—they lose their heads.

Then charity came in for its turn. Poor people always like me, and I like them for a time. Then suddenly I began to *smell* them, and there was an end of that.

All this time, Phil, I never forgot Gordon Blair. For months I'd hardly think of him, and then some night I'd dream of him, so vividly as nearly to break my heart. And for weeks after I could think only of him, his face being as distinctly

before my eyes as though he were there in person.

At last a young Sicilian came to Rome, who looked like him,—Gordon. And he fell in love with me.

That brought it all back to me, and I really suffered, while it gave me the keenest pleasure. Do you understand? Can any one human being really understand another?

At all events, I had just decided to let everything go and fall in love with d'Argenti, when Uncle Peter's cable came.

I came at once, and I really did my best to help her, and make up to her for my neglect.

Of course I posed,—in voice and manner and dress,—of course I played the ministering angel, but that is a thing apart,—I cannot help it. What is of importance is that I tried to be useful and gentle.

And my old horror of pain and death seemed to melt away as I tried. I suppose that is a sign that I might have been

good had I learned to overcome myself.

The day after the funeral he came.

I should have gone away with him at once, but I couldn't bear to leave poor old Uncle Peter. So I waited, and once more was as good as I knew how to be.

And to-morrow I join Gordon at New York. I am quite calm now, but to you I must say that I have struggled. I am giving up a great deal, Phil, and things that I love. There was always a broad vulgar streak in me, you know,—inherited, I suppose, from my poor little mother, who was a dressmaker. Even now, on the eve of this tremendous step, I find my thoughts turning to my jewels, to my horses.

And yet I am happy. All my life I have lied and posed, and found no inner obstacle to anything I wished to do, and yet I shall feel myself *cleaner* if I go than if I stayed,—you will know what I mean.

And that counts, even with me. It

cannot be conscience, so it must be pride, but the feeling is there.

Is it not queer that *I* should comfort myself with the thought that in one sense I shall be honest even in my dishonour?

After all, whose fault is it?

Do you remember the stanza in the "Rubaiyat"?

> "Some there are who tell
> Of One who threatens He will toss to Hell
> The pots He marr'd in making."

I think I must have been marred in making. Something made me, and as I am. I always could distinguish between right and wrong. It was not that I did not know, it was only that I did not care. Did not and do not.

I am kind by nature, and have many good impulses, and yet—I have simply no moral hold on things. Every anchor drags with me. *Basta!* Here I am again taking myself apart to see the wheels go round.

Good-bye. To-morrow I go, and I am

happy. When you think of me, don't think of the Duchess di Roccabianca, whom indeed you never saw, nor of Gordon Blair's mistress, whom you never will see. Think only of one who has always been fond of you, and who will never forget you.

BETH.

* * * * * * *

Two days later, Phil Pollock stood in the parlour of the Gurney house looking down at Beth in her coffin.

They had found her, the morning after she had written to him, in the river, not far from the Pocahontas Club Landing.

No one knew why, the woman who let him in had told him.

But Pollock knew. He knew that the undisciplined mind, struggling between two possibilities, had not been strong enough to renounce either.

The Duchess of Roccabianca could not give up the self-respect that she had called her pride, and Elisabeth Gurney could not give up her love.

And he knew that at the end the woman had done her best, in her poor, blind way.

While he stood in the sun, looking down at her still face, the door opened and a man came in.

"You are Gordon Blair?" said the cripple, who had never seen the other.

"Yes," answered Blair, hoarsely, "and you are Pollock. You knew her. Tell me,—did she really love me?"

Pollock laid his hand on the edge of the coffin, as though he were speaking for the woman within it.

"Yes. What she had to give, she gave to you."

Then he went out and left them alone together.

THE END.

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